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OR,

The Mountain Rivals.

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DICK" SERIES, "ALWAYS ON HAND,"
"A HARD CROWD," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MOUNTAIN WITCH.

It was a night for ghosts and hobgoblins to be abroad.

One moment the moon looked down through a jagged rift in the clouds, like the face of some frightened specter peering in at the window of a haunted house. The next it was gone from sight as if fleeing at the sound of a mortal footstep.

In the uncertain light the swaying pines seemed to start with life; and the wind blowing through them filled the darkness with uncanny sounds.

Now, as a chill breath touched the cheek, a faint sigh was whispered into the ear, and the

DON DIABLO, WHO WAS A WITNESS TO ALL THIS REMARKABLE SCENE, RUBBED HIS HANDS IN GLEE. "HA! HA!" HE CHUCKLED, "THE VERY FIENDS ARE PLAYING INTO MY HAND!"

leaves rustled as with the trail of invisible garments. Anon the air was filled with shrieks and wailing, that fled away down the canyon into the night-shrouded distance.

On such a night a figure of unmistakable tangibility—since dry twigs snapped beneath its tread with a sharp crackle—crept stealthily from shadow of crag to covert of pine-boughs, dodging from point to point, in a zig-zag course, with long pauses of watchful hiding.

An unexpected burst of moonlight caught this figure stealing across an open glade, and revealed a medley of fluttering rags that made a very shabby pretense of clothing a gaunt, ungainly body, loose-jointed and shambling.

A face that had the bloodless, unhealthy look of tallow, framed in rags and tatters of hair, matted and frowzy with long neglect, was lifted to the moon for an instant. Then, with a duck of the head, the boy, youth, man—it was difficult to decide which—scurried to cover like a frightened animal.

Crouching in the dense shadow of a boulder, he peered about with panting breath and trembling limbs, turning his head from side to side with spasmodic jerks, at every fancied sound.

His eyes wavered with incessant restlessness, and in the poise of his head, and in the mirthless grimace that sat upon his features, could be traced the unmistakable signs of imbecility.

"Ha! ha!" he panted, rather than laughed, "they nearly ketched the young man that time!"

But as nothing occurred to startle him further, he gathered courage and resumed his course.

"Wonder of the old 'un 'll be straddlin' her broomstick?" he ruminated. "She'll fly out an' snatch me baldheaded, ef she gits her bad eye on him! Ha! ha! ha!"

Further and further into a wild mountain gorge penetrated the imbecile, until he came upon a rude log hut, which had been built and occupied by a party of prospectors, but had been long deserted, until the rains had washed out the clay with which its loose walls had been chinked, until now it was but little more than a protection against wild beasts—certainly presenting little obstruction to the entrance of wind and rain.

Through the gaping logs could be seen a flickering illumination, which filled the interior with a dim light.

"The dinged thing ain't blue," muttered the imbecile, in a disappointed tone, after staring for a longtime in breathless expectancy. "Reck-on, now, as how she's run short o' brimstun."

As if drawn by fascination, the watcher crept still nearer, until he reached the wall of the hut, where he applied his eyes to a chink, and stared directly into the room.

The inside of the hut was as cheerless as the outside.

In the center of the earthen floor was a dying fire, over which was hanging a black pot from three poles. Beside this crouched an old crone—a negress, as black as the pot, and hideous beyond description. Her dress was a medley of rags, of every hue and texture—red flannel, brown hollands, black cassimere, and even odds and ends of gunnycloth. Her woolly hair was matted with heaven knows what—it might have been wax, or tar, or the slimy mud which the wretched squaws of the Southwest use for hair-dressing—and built up into a sort of tiara.

On one shoulder of the motionless figure lay an immense black cat; and these two were the only living things visible in the hut.

The pot, if indeed it was used for such a purpose, was the only sign of a cooking utensil. There was nothing to eat from—not even a battered tin plate.

A shakedown of mountain moss in one corner seemed to suggest a bed. On it in a heap lay what, if it had been straightened out, would have been seen to be a tattered and filthy old army blanket. There was nothing else of any kind in the hut.

When the imbecile had stared at this scene until his curiosity was nearly satisfied, he was suddenly startled into wild affright by the sound of hoofs rapidly approaching.

He would have fled; but the moon was for the moment shining so clearly that he must almost inevitably be discovered, especially as the rider was already quite close upon him, so concluded that his safest recourse was to crouch close to the earth, and leave the rest to fate.

The rider came on until he drew rein directly before the door.

His horse shied, tossed his head, pawed the ground, and snorted with disgust or fear; but the rider forced him with spur and rein close up to the door, and almost upon the crouching boy.

"Steady there, you brute!" he commanded. "Human nature can get so loathsome that even the beasts can't abide it!"

With his riding-whip he beat upon the door, calling:

"Hollo, Old Goggle-eye!"

The crone within did not move, nor reply in any way, at which he dismounted, kicked open the door unceremoniously, and entered.

"Hollo, old woman!—have you gone to sleep?" demanded the intruder, poking the motionless figure with the end of his whip. "I'm here on

business. Everything is now ready for the grand transformation scene. I depend on you for my make-up in the character of the dashing Spanish Don."

While speaking, he kicked the straggling fire-brands together, so that they flared up with a steadier blaze.

The light discovered a man of rather prepossessing appearance. His figure, not more than medium, was so proportioned as to give the impression of strength and activity. His bearing, though quiet, indicated courage, promptness, decision. He wore a full beard, rather shaggy; but this could not hide the fact that his bronzed features were good. His nose was straight and thin, with sensitive nostrils. His brow was intellectual. His eyes were finely formed, and had an intensity that was almost startling.

But they were eyes that might—if he willed—melt with languishing tenderness. More than one woman had sighed and trembled beneath their magnetic light.

His dress was that of a ranchman. It sat upon him with a natural grace, as if he had been born to it. But that was the case with anything he chose to wear.

The secret of this was, that the man was a born actor.

The negress lifted her round, staring eyes to the speaker's face, then rose from what proved to be a flat stone.

"You're not very weli off for furniture, Granny Goggle eye, are you?" the visitor laughed.

"Dis ole rack o' bones doan' need much furniture," she replied, shambling off toward a black fire-place against the rear wall of the hut, which consisted of the rock against which the structure was built.

The black cat did not move from its place on her shoulder, and she seemed to be so used to its presence there as to give it no heed.

By this time the imbecile crouching without had plucked up enough courage to peer into the hut through a chink close to the ground.

He saw the man toss his hat to one side, and then remove a wig and false beard.

The change in his appearance was astonishing.

He had looked like a middle-aged man, hair and beard showing the effect of careless neglect and exposure to the rain and sun of an out-of-door life, but was now seen to be a young man, certainly under thirty. His hair was the intense black of a tropical race—soft and fine. He wore a slight, graceful mustache, as black and as fine as his hair.

Without ceremony he proceeded to remove his outer garments, displaying underclothing cleanly and almost finikin in daintiness.

Meanwhile the old hag, raking amid the ashes in the unused fireplace, found a crevice, into which she put the point of her wooden poker, and using this as a lever, caused what appeared to be a portion of the rock, though in fact it was a sort of door with a facing of mortar, to swing outward, revealing a hollow in the face of the cliff, like a large closet.

From this receptacle she took a complete suit of clothes, such as are worn by a Mexican cavalier—the heavily-bullioned sombrero, the gaudily-buttoned jacket, the shirt and sash and gay *serape*, the trousers slashed at the knee.

While her visitor was arraying himself in these, she drew forth an earthen jar containing a dark-brown liquid, of about the consistency of molasses, and several pieces of chamois leather.

"Now, Granny," he said, "I want you to do the best job of your life. I've got to pass under the scrutiny of a sharp pair of eyes, more than once, perhaps, and a suspicion of the truth will dish my sauce."

"Don'tee worry, chile," said the negress, confidently. "De own mammy don't 'cognize her pickaninny when Granny Goggle-eye turn 'em out."

She set to work to stain his skin to the right shade for a Mexican, making it darker, if anything, than the average, so as to contrast as much as possible with his natural complexion.

When she was through no one could have detected the disguise.

This slight change of hue gave an added intensity to the fire of his eyes, and made his smile fiendish in its cruelty.

When his head had been bound about with a silk handkerchief, and rings were attached to the lobes of his ears in such a way that they seemed to pierce the flesh, though this was not the fact, he was the picture of a ranchero of the *sangre azul*.

The hag held a looking-glass in which he examined himself with great care.

He then attested his satisfaction by doffing his sombrero with a ceremonious sweeping bow to her, saying:

"Don Diablo, a service de V."

"G'long!" retorted the old beldam.

Thus disguised, the man took his departure, while the hag returned to her crouching posture by the fire.

Half dead with fear of detection, the imbecile crept away, following the direction down the gorge taken by the man who had called himself Don Diablo.

At the mouth of the gulch the latter found a

ragged-looking ruffian, who had apparently been left on guard.

"Nobody stirring?" he asked.

"Neither hide nor hair this way."

"I didn't believe any of the superstitious fools would think of visiting the old devil's dam on such a night; but I ain't taking any chances."

He did not guess into whose keeping his secret had fallen.

CHAPTER II.

CALIFORNY KIT.

INTO the rustling little camp of Slabtown rode one of the most remarkable of the heroic band of men which the Wild West has produced.

He was full six feet in stature, and proportioned like an Apollo. His broad, massive chest gave the scope of lung necessary for endurance; his well-rounded limbs evinced the culture of the athlete employed to bring out the best points of fine stock.

The broad, high brow—the straight, thin nose—the firm, yet flexible lips—the strong, though not too prominent chin; these features, lighted by eyes that were as calm as they were keen, showed that the physical man was ruled by a spirit of the finest metal.

The dress betrayed the influence of the life he had always led. Too "loud" for eastern notions, it was picturesque in the extreme; a broad-brimmed slouch hat; a "biled" shirt, from the bosom of which blazed a large solitaire diamond; a velvet sack coat, with binding an inch wide and facings of silk; trousers of the finest texture, visible only the length of the thigh, where they were met by top-boots of morocco, armed with golden spurs; for effect, nothing could have been better chosen.

Worth such a master was the horse he bestrode, his sleek black hide, his blood-red nostrils, his rolling eyes, yet restrained by even a touch on the snaffle.

Up to the Mountaineer's Rest rode this knight "without fear and without reproach," and swung from his saddle with a graceful motion that did not disturb the equilibrium of his horse.

"Californy Kit, ur I'm a liar!" cried a hearty voice. "Waal, waal, ole man—ef this hyar ain't good fur sore eyes!"

In a moment he was surrounded, with half a dozen hands soliciting his acceptance.

"Boys," he said, with a pleasant smile, "you do me proud! Can I say more?"

"That's enough, by thunder!"

"Talk's cheap, Kit. It's what you *does* as takes the cake."

"But thar's some talk that no well-regulated community can do without," said Kit, with a suggestive smile.

"An' what's that, now?"

"It's short and sweet, and good United States lingo in the bargain."

"You jest bet it is, ef we git it out o' you. Spiel, ole man!"

"It's just this:—*What'll ye have?*"

A roar of laughter greeted this sally. Kit was slapped on the back; and his friends pressed through the doorway with him into the hospitable bar of the Mountaineer's Rest.

"Hollo, Lan," he cried. "What are you doing with such a lot of D. D.'s hanging around your shanty?"

"Waal, whar in Cain *did* you rain from? Deuced dry? You bet they be! Shake, ole man!"

And the host of the Mountaineer's Rest extended a cordial handclasp over his bar.

When the first interest of the reception was over, Lan called an assistant to the bar, and walked out to a seat on the piazza with his guest.

"Waal, now, let's have it," he said, again.

"How's how, anyhow?"

"Nothing doing," replied Californy Kit.

"All quiet on the Potomac? Injuns is takin' a rest? No scoutin', I reckon?"

"Nary."

"But, say, Kit! 'pears to me I hyeared somethin' about your goin' into the minin' biz? How's that?"

"Played!"

"Got left? Sho!"

"No. I made a strike."

"Ye don't say! Waal, that's good. But why didn't ye hang on, then?"

"Too slow, Lan."

"I'm blowed ef most as I've knowed ain't liken to grind at that mill middlin' stiddy."

"If it's to their taste, I've nothing against it; but it won't do for me. I want *life*."

If that was true, he was destined to have it, and without much wailing; for, without suspecting it, he was on the eve of one of the stirring adventures of his eventful life.

Even as he spoke, the stage came bowling into camp with a grand flourish.

"What's aboard?" cried Lan Lanslow, as the cloud of dust swept by.

"Sn!" sibilated the Baby, as the burly stage-driver was called, the Baby Elephant.

"No!" ejaculated Lan, in response to his look of mysterious intelligence.

"Pon me soul!" responded the Baby, and supplemented this assurance with a cabalistic sign, holding up two fingers; then throwing the lines

upon the backs of his steaming horses, he leaped into the midst of an eager throng.

"Boys," he said, grasping the hands of those nearest, "do you see the tears in my eyes?"

"What's the matter with you, you ole galoot?" was the laughing interrogatory.

"We've been havin' an ovation all along the line."

"I bet you have!"

"Yes. An' I was mortal afraid they'd fill me up to the throttle before I got to Slabtown."

"We'd never forgive ye, Baby, on sich a trip as this. Two, did ye say?"

"Sul! Say nothin'! But, boys, I saved a leetle corner, jest so's not to break Lan Lonslow's gizzard—blast him!"

"Never mind the stage door. Californy Kit's ekil to that. You git in the house; an' we'll put yer ole in'ards to pickle in Lan's best, ef we have to pump ye out fu'st."

It was plain that the Baby had been making this a red-letter trip. He had the reputation of being able to carry as much liquor as his skin would hold. It was his boast that all he asked was to be set on the box. Once in place, he was as steady as a church.

Now he clung to a man on either side, while he waited with a grin for Californy Kit to open the door of the coach.

But everybody started with a look of surprise, as a sharp, rasping voice came from within the coach, saying:

"Well, I swan to gracious, ef this here don't beat the nation!"

A face quite in keeping with the voice appeared at the window, looking out upon the expectant crowd with vinegarish asperity.

It was such a face as could be produced nowhere outside of New England; and, together with the lankness and angularity of the figure of its owner, it marked a maiden lady of doubtful age, but of not uncertain temper.

"Waal, I swar!" muttered one of the boys, too low, however, to reach the ears of the spinster. "This hyar's a good beginnin', this is!"

"A sell!" groaned another. "An' you've been fillin' up on the like of it, you ole fraud!"

The speaker turned upon the Baby Elephant with a look of blended amusement and disgust.

The stage-driver chuckled in his fat throat, and kept his twinkling eyes just wide enough open to look about on the faces of the crowd, hugely enjoying the various ways in which their disappointment was expressed.

There was Billy Bang-up, as he was called, who prided himself on his reputation as a lady-killer, and was never so delighted as at the prospect of a new conquest. He had secretly resolved to try conclusions with Californy Kit in this instance; but at sight of the candidate, he looked ready to swear.

The rest grinned, at his expense and their own.

But Californy Kit's face was politely grave, as he opened the door of the coach, lifting his hat and saying:

"Ladies, if you will allow me!"

In the gathering gloom he caught a glimpse of another form, which seemed to be reclining wearily in the further corner; but before he could clearly make it out, it was hidden from view by Miss Prudence Prouter, who rose and filled the doorway with her angular person.

"Allow ye? Allow ye what?" she demanded, eying him suspiciously, while she fumbled in the depths of a reticule slung to her arm by the drawing-string.

"Allow me to assist you to alight," returned Kit, in his suavest tones.

"Not if I know myself!" was the tart retort. "I don't let no livin' man tetch me!"

And adjusting to her nose a pair of steel-bowed spectacles which she had now found and drawn forth, she glared through them at Kit, and went on:

"Young man, by the cut o' yer jib and the general look o' things, I should say that we had fallen among a passel o' road-agents. Air you the chief o' this gang?"

"The respectful attention which you will receive as long as you honor Slabtown with your presence," answered Kit, with a faint smile, "will satisfy you that we are not so bad as we look. This is a regular baiting-place of the stage, and these are honest fellows, every one of whom would gladly place himself at your service, in case of need."

"You bet!" came heartily from one of the miners.

"I've seen a better-lookin' crowd than this, and that's a fact," declared Miss Prouter, casting a critical glance over the upturned faces.

"Prue! Prue!" expostulated a voice within the coach—a voice of such plaintive music that the boys started again, with an eagerness greater than before.

Miss Prouter turned round as if some one had tugged at her skirts.

"Don't you worry, my dear," she said. "I've managed 'cuter men than these in my time, and I guess I'm ekil to the occasion."

She gathered up several bundles, and turned again to her would-be gallant.

"Now, if you'll jest keep your distance, young man," she said, "I'll git down out o' this here bone-rackin' rattle-trap. I vum! it's about shook the soul-case out o' me!"

When she had reached the ground, Lan Lonslow stepped forward and "tried his luck."

"I run this hyar shebang, mum," he said; "an' ef so be you don't mind lettin' me help ye with them thar bundles—"

Miss Prudence turned and skewered him with a glance.

"I guess I kin keep the run o' my business, ef you'll give all yer time to yourn," she said, slowly.

"Jest as you say, mum!" replied Lan, retreating in some confusion, slyly jeered by the witnesses of his discomfiture.

Meanwhile the remaining occupant of the coach had risen, to present at the doorway a face and figure that sent a thrill of wondering delight through the crowd.

She was a woman of two-or-three-and-twenty, evidently ill, as her wan cheeks and languid air sufficiently attested; but, if anything, this only enhanced her exquisite beauty and grace. Never had any one there seen anything so delicate, so pure, so in every way lovely. They were more used to buxom lasses of a hundred and forty or fifty pounds, who could shoulder a two-bushel bag of grain without shortening their breath.

But Kit was electrified by a look of such woe-begone sadness as he had never before beheld on a human face.

What was the tragedy in this woman's life, so young, so beautiful, yet so unhappy?

"Madam," he said, once more advancing, and now speaking in a voice so soft that it was like a caress, "you will not consider it an intrusion, if I again venture to tender my services?"

"You are very kind, sir," replied the lady, looking at him with eyes that made him her slave on the spot.

But Miss Prudence brushed in before him, with blazing eyes.

"I will say, you air!" she declared, "amazin' kind, an' altogether too familiar!"

"I beg your pardon, sir!" said the invalid lady, a vivid crimson spot appearing in either cheek.

"Don't mention it!" replied Kit, retreating with a grace which showed his metal to the best advantage. "I regret being the cause of a moment's unpleasantness to you."

He turned to the crowd, and in a quick, peremptory, yet quiet tone, which was peculiar to him, said:

"Boys, I reckon there's something of interest further down the street."

They understood him, and obeyed without a sign of opposition.

As the lady alighted with the assistance of the dragon who guarded her, in the place of having to pick her way through a gaping crowd, there was nothing but their retreating backs presented to her, Californy Kit accompanying them as they walked off.

"Prue, how could you be so rude?" asked the lady, reproachfully. "He is a perfect gentleman."

"There's oceans an' slathers o' sich perfect gentlemen!" muttered Miss Prue, as she piloted her charge into the house, past the landlord, who shrunk against the wall so as to offer no obstruction. "Ef he ain't a road-agent chief, he's a play-actor; an' I'll bet money on it! But I know a born Yankee that was one too many fur 'im that time anyway!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SPANISH DON.

AN ugly night, with black, hurrying clouds rent by zigzag lightning, and howling wind, and hissing rain, and the bellowing thunder responded to by the roar of floods surging down the gulches.

In the midst of this pandemonium of nature, a solitary horseman goading his beast with savage impetuosity. He wore a Mexican sombrero, and was rapped in a *serape*, of which the wind seemed determined to rob him.

As he bowed before the sweeping gusts, clinging to the fluttering garment, and trying to screen his eyes from the pelting rain, he swore wrathfully in a polyglot of Spanish and English; and when he was allowed a moment's respite from this struggle, added the sting of a riding-whip, which he carried slung to his wrist, to the incessant torture of jingling Mexican spurs.

"Shall I never get out of this fiend's carnival?" he growled, grinding his teeth. "Curse these Americanos!—does their camp keep moving on before me?"

"I thought that I was well out of this life. Nobody but a fool would return to it—to be hanged, as like as not!"

He shrugged his shoulders at this thought, and laughed a cold-blooded chuckle which bespoke a contempt for violence against himself and a ruthless cruelty in its infliction upon others.

A flare of lightning, just as the wind swept the brim of his sombrero up off his face, revealed a countenance that might have served for a portrait of the arch fiend. There was a gleam of white teeth, and the glitter of black eyes, in a face of evil import.

"But revenge! revenge!" he repeated, with

demoniac gusto. "Who would stop at the gates of Sheol in pursuit of it?"

"Maledictions on the wind, the rain, the road; on this awkward brute that never misses a hole big enough to get his hoof into; and finally, now and always, on the accursed Americanos, who have invaded this country like a swarm of locusts, blighting every spot that knows their presence!"

This comprehensive curse had scarcely passed his lips, when he dashed into Slabtown, and a moment later reined up, not before the Mountaineer's Rest, but at a rival establishment, called The Last Ditch, and at once shouted for a stable-boy. A sulky specimen of one presented himself, under his breath cursing the "Greaser" who ordered him out so peremptorily.

"Dolt! will you keep me waiting in the rain all night?" cried the Spaniard, hotly.

"I'm a-comin' jist as fast as I kin!" growled the hostler, quickening his pace somewhat at the sharpness of the challenge.

"You may thank your patron saint that I am not in a humor to stop and teach you a horn-pipe, to put some life into your lazy bones!" retorted the Spaniard, leaping to the ground, tossing the rein to the groom, and turning to enter the house.

Afraid to further provoke the man, the stable-boy vented his spleen on the horse, giving the bridle rein a spiteful wrench.

The spirited animal, goaded almost to frenzy by his merciless rider, leaped aside with a spasmodic start, tripped, fell, and scrambled to his feet, to limp with some injury sustained.

The master whirled round, with an instant realization of what had been done.

"Insolent scoundrel!" he cried, with a string of Spanish oaths.

Then like the wind he leaped toward the offender, and before he could move or lift a hand in defense, cut once! twice! thrice! with his whip, so fiercely that it whistled through the air.

A howl of pain and terror burst from the groom; and clapping his hands to his face he turned and ran blindly toward the stables.

Instantly came the banging of hurriedly-opened doors; and in a twinkling, as if they had started up out of the ground, the spot was thronged with excited men.

"What's the row? Who's hurt?" was the demand.

There was nothing gentle about the patrons of The Last Ditch. What they had to say was always couched in the most emphatic English at command, and their tones and manner were such as to convey the idea that they were fire-eaters, if not man-eaters, every one.

However, the Spaniard betrayed no disturbance. He caught his horse, and coolly proceeded to examine into its injuries.

"Hoo-oo-oo-oo!" bawled the stable-boy, as his friends gathered about him, appealing to him with their wonted profanity to know what had happened. "That infernal Greaser had cut my eyes out—blast his ugly pictur!"

"Kill him, Jimmy!"

"Slug the snoozer!"

"Cut the daylights out of 'im!"

But James was in no condition to carry out these sanguinary suggestions. Not only was he blinded with the blood that flowed from two ugly gashes across his never handsome phiz, but he was thoroughly cowed.

In his varied experience he had learned to know a "bad" man when he saw him, and he was fain to content himself with what he had already received, rather than run the risk of getting a bullet through his head, or the needle-like point of a Spanish stiletto in his heart.

However, the crowd, with the courage of numbers, were like to jump at the chance of espousing his cause—not particularly for the love they bore him, but from hatred of a despised race, and from their innate lust for violence; so the situation for the cavalier was threatening, but the stranger paid them no more heed, apparently, than if they were a lot of boys wrangling over a matter in which he had no concern.

At this point a stocky little man issued from The Last Ditch, and elbowed his way through the crowd with an air of authority.

He had a bullet head, with short, bristling hair; his nose was dented in, its symmetry forever destroyed by a slashing blow with a bowie; his jaw, protruding pugnaciously, was black with a stubbly beard.

Scowling villainously, Handsome Hank Hogan looked not unlike a human bulldog.

"What's the row hyar?" he demanded, with the aggressive insolence of a bully.

The stranger stopped stroking his horse's leg, stood erect, and looked at the challenger without immediate reply.

However, half a dozen voices volunteered the information that the stranger had made an unprovoked assault upon Jimmy Duffy.

The Spaniard waited quietly, looking about on the circle of lowering faces lighted by a lantern which one of the men had brought from the stable.

While they were in full career, working up testimony as they went along, out of the raw material of their imaginations, Handsome Hank

silenced them with a wave of his hand, and a gruff:

"Cheese it!"

Then he turned upon the stranger, thrusting his head forward with a murderous scowl; and demanding:

"Well?"

His hand went back to his hip with a gesture which needed no interpretation.

The Spaniard did not move, save that one hand had disappeared within the folds of his serape.

"My friend," he said, as quietly as if he were about to ask the time of day, "you are the proprietor of this fonda?"

"Ye're right; I am! I niver go behind the dure wid my name. It's Han'some Hank Hogan. I have a counthry-seat at High Lot, whayre I occasionally invite my fri'nds fur the summer! Now, who in blazes are you?"

"Don Felipe Raviero, at your service."

"An' what fur are yez rowin' wid me b'y, I dunno?"

Without waiting for an answer, the bully proceeded to pour forth a volley of execration, and whipped out his revolver, as if for instant and deadly execution.

"Gently, my friend!" cautioned the Spaniard. "It is but fair to tell you, before you lead off, that I never play trumps without taking the trick."

Not a muscle of his body seemed to move, save those employed in speaking and in his imperturbable smile. One thing was apparent to all; there was no sign of his "taking water."

That mystical smile, that unmoved self-possession, daunted Handsome Hank Hogan.

"You've got a we'pon thar!" he declared, fixing his eyes with a sort of fascination upon the spot where he supposed the other's hidden hand to be.

The Spaniard shrugged his shoulders, and his upper lip lifted quiveringly from his white teeth.

"Is this your usual reception of strangers?" he asked. "Yon sullen knave lames my horse; I punish him, and find myself beset by a crowd thirsting for my blood. Well, it is to be had, if you are bent upon it; but not gratis."

In a blustering tone, this challenge might have found acceptance; but the deadly cold politeness of his voice daunted the best of them.

"Lamed yer horse!" cried Handsome Hank, seeing a way out of an awkward corner. "Why didn't ye say so? Blast his eyes! I'll give him the double of what you have!"

And he turned upon the doleful Duffy so savagely as to put him to renewed flight.

"Come, gentlemen! you have piled your chips on a losing card," said Don Felipe, with off-hand nonchalance, and without deigning further notice of their hostility, he passed his horse over to another groom, and walked through their midst into the house.

They followed at his heels, not a little mollified by his next move.

"Bartender," he said, throwing some gold on the counter, "my friends are as dry inside as they are wet out. Gentlemen, here's to our better understanding!"

"Blow me ef your heart ain't in the right place, pardner!" cried a bloated old bummer. "A gent as pays his footin' so han'some has a right to his leetle amusement."

But outside in the storm, a white face was pressed against the window-pane—a face lighted by wild eyes, and against which lay elf-locks of damp, straggling hair.

"That's him!—that's him! It's the devil come to life ag'in!" panted the owner of the face. "He cut his eyes out, he did. Lucky he didn't cut his soul out! What's he up to now? No good to nobody on this hyar airth, I'll bet a shillin'!"

Jabbering in this way to himself, the speaker stole from point to point, peering in through first one window and then another, or through the door when it happened to be opened by some one going in or out.

So absorbed was he, that he presently ran against one of two men who were stumbling along through the darkness and storm.

"Blast yer eyes!" shouted the man run against.

The offender leaped away to avoid the blow that was aimed at him, returning only a wild laugh.

"It's that infernal Luny," said the man to his companion; and though his words were harsh, it was noticeable that the anger in his voice had given place to good-natured indulgence.

CHAPTER IV. ON THE PIAZZA.

CALIFORNIA KIT sat on the piazza of the Mountaineer's Rest, with his feet on the railing, his chair tilted back, his hat drawn over his eyes, and his hands thrust deep in his pockets, nervously jingling coins.

The storm, coming from the back of the house, left the piazza dry and comfortable. The rain had ceased, but the house shook with the furious assaults of the wind, that was tearing the clouds into jagged masses, so as to let occasional gleams of moonlight through.

The man sat there alone in the darkness, wrapped in agitated thought.

"A confounded fool!" he ejaculated, savagely. "What's the matter with me, anyway? She ain't the first pretty woman I have ever seen."

But a glow of tenderness swept over him like a breath of warm and fragrant air from a conservatory.

"A fool! a fool! a fool!" he reiterated. "What do I know about her, or she about me? What does she care? She'd laugh in my face! By Jove! she'd be a fool if she didn't!"

"If you will allow me, ma'am!"—I beg your pardon, sir!—and I'm gone!"

The tavern door opened; its proprietor came out with a sort of rush, and sat on the rail near Kit's feet.

"I say, old stockin's!" he ejaculated with a laugh, and slapping Kit's leg sharply, "did you ever see anythin' to beat?"

"Beat what?" asked Kit, dryly.

"What? Nothin'! Thar's only one thing on the board to-night. The Baby's so fur gone, that half the time he pours his licker in his ear, an' t'other half down the back of his neck. But, say!—hain't he brung the devil an' all along this trip?"

And Lan shook his sides with laughter.

Kit turned his head slightly toward the end of the piazza; but he asked, quietly:

"Who are they? What do they want out hyar?"

"Waal, now, you tell," replied Lan.

"Didn't they register?"

"Register? Whe-e-ew!"

Lan blew a long whistle.

"Ef you've got chips to put up on ary man to stand up before her with that book in his hand fur four three-minute rounds, I'll see ye fur ail I'm worth—by Jing, I will!"

"Why, man alive— But, hold on! You know Bouncin' Bet?"

"Your red-headed housekeeper?"

"Weighs a ton when she's mad—which is all the time. Thar ain't no two-legged creetur what da'st to straddle the door-sill when she's swingin' the cat in the kitchen. Waal, that holy terror from Yanktown has walked in on her as if she'd come to stay. I cut an' run, not 'lowin' to come in fur no clapperclawin' when the fur begins to fly."

"What! she has raided your kitchen?"

"I should smile!"

"Mr. Man! she says to me, 'we're mighty pertickler folks, we be; but we pay as we go. We air willin' to bolt our peck like Christmas, 'thout no wry face; but we don't 'low to be p'isoned all to won't. Ef the Lord's willin', I'm goin' into that thar kitchen an' git my young lady a meal o' victuals what ye kin kin ask a blessin' over with a clear conscience, with my own hands,' says she."

"All right, marm," says I. 'Ef you kin git away with the oc-cu-pant, you takes the cake, you do. But, as a friend, I'd advise ye to strap a howitzer to yer, loaded with fourteen dynamite bombs, an' glue yer scalp on, before ye wake up Bouncin' Bet,' says I."

"Don't you lose no sleep on my account, Mr. Man. I wa'n't hatched yistiddy," says she.

"An' then she sails in, an' I slides out!"

Lan chuckled as he tried to fancy the result of this venture, and both he and Californy Kit listened for some sound from the kitchen.

During a lull in the wind, a high-pitched, querulous voice made itself heard.

"Thar she goes!" cried Lan, with animation.

But Californy Kit did not reply.

Without perceptibly turning his head, he glanced toward the end of the piazza.

A moment later a scream of rage told that matters had reached a climax in the culinary department.

"Hang me!" cried Lan, as excited as at a dog-fight, and leaping from his perch, and seizing Kit's hand, he burst out:

"Two to one on the Yankee bone-yard! Done?—done?"

"Good Lord! let me out! Hyar's the devil to pay!"

The house resounded with the furious bang of a door; then came the heavy tramp of feet, as if a grenadier were pacing in iron boots.

A door opening upon the piazza slammed back against the wall, and the figure of a woman crossed the threshold.

"Lan Lonslow!" demanded a shrill, rasping voice, "air you the boss o' this hyar ranch?"

The speaker stood in the bar of light, which streamed through the doorway, her arms akimbo, her fists dug into her hips, her head canted stiffly on one side—as formidable-looking a virago as one need wish to see.

Behind her, the doorway was filled by grinning men, who listened all agog.

"What's the row, Bet?" asked Lan.

"Air you the boss o' this hyar ranch?—I want to know!"

"I generally 'low to be."

Californy Kit took his feet down off the railing, and gathered them under him. His face was turned toward the furious vixen; but his attention, through his ears, went out toward the end of the piazza.

"Do I rule the roost in the kitchen, or don't I?" was the next demand.

"I never put in my oar, Bet. You will allow that," was Lan's conciliatory plea.

"Waal, it's about time you did! Ef you don't go in thar an' bounce that sassy hussy from the States, I'll never set foot across that threshold ag'in the longest day you live! You kin pile all your wealth on that!" and with a founce she turned to re-enter the house, the laughing men scattering in mock consternation before her.

"Waal, Kit— Eh? What the deuce!"

For with a bound Californy Kit had cleared the end of the piazza, disappearing in the darkness.

In opened-mouthed astonishment Lan stared in the direction in which his friend had gone.

From the darkness came the sounds of a brief scuffle, and a terror-shaken voice—too high-pitched for a man, yet too strong and full for a woman—pleading piteously:

"Hold on, boss! Don't murder me! I wa'n't doin' nothin'—jest nothin' at all!"

CHAPTER V. SUSPICION.

CALIFORNIA KIT stepped back upon the piazza, hustling forward into the light a cringing and cowering figure.

"Who's this?" he asked, holding his captive up with one hand, so as to prevent him from sinking upon his knees.

"That?" said Lan. "Oh, that's only Luny."

"Yes, boss—it's only me," said the prisoner, with a shivering laugh. "Lan Lonslow'll back me fur to be on the straight. Won't ye, Lan?"

"Fur rocks," assured Lan, without hesitation. "Thar ain't no harm in Luny. He's got 'em in the upper story; but that's all."

"That's all!" repeated Luny, with the unmistakable laugh of an imbecile.

Lan Lonslow went indoors, to "curry Bouncin' Bet with the lay o' the hair." The men followed him, to see the fun.

Californy Kit, alone not quite satisfied in regard to Luny, proceeded to look him over.

He was a youth of twenty, or thereabouts, bare-headed and footed, and with his lank frame clothed in rags. His unkempt yellow hair hung about his temples like candle-wicking.

"What have you been prowling around spying upon me for?" asked Kit.

Luny was instantly fired with excitement. Assuming a myfterious air, he went on tip-toe to see that no one was lingering near the door to overhear him, and then returned to Kit, seizing him by the sleeve, and urging:

"Come along o' me, boss! You're the man fur this hyar job. It wants sand, an' that you've got; an' it wants a head-piece, the which mine ain't fitten nohow."

"Hold on, my Christian friend! Nct so fast," objected Kit, as the youth was dragging him away. "What are you trying to get through you?"

Luny turned and looked at him earnestly.

"Why, don't ye want to do it?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"See him an' go him one better. Ef you don't thar hain't no one in this hyar camp what kin touch one side of him. I tell ye he's the devil; an' I know. Bless ye—shouldn't I?"

"Whom are you talking about?"

"Him—Don Diablo."

Californy Kit started.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed.

Luny regarded the speaker with a bewildered look, and then shook his head slowly.

"Thar ain't no foolishness about him," he said.

"He was born with the devil in him, an' it's always a-croppin' out. When he's around, somebody's goin' to git peeled."

"But that accursed Mexican has skipped the country."

"It's a mighty easy thing fur him to skip back ef he wants to. It's him. Come an' see."

"But I shouldn't know him. I never saw him."

"I hev. Good Lord—I've seen too much of him!"

Californy Kit hung back. This addled brain was not to be relied upon. Brooding over stories of the renowned villain the boy might fancy that he saw him in any chance Mexican.

Kit was not afraid of danger; but he did not wish to be made ridiculous by being set upon a wild-goose chase by a fool.

However, this might prove a momentary diversion from the agitation of his mind; and he resolved to lend himself to the imbecile's humor, ready to withdraw when he saw fit.

"Go on," he said. "Let's see your Don Diablo."

Luny led the way toward The Last Ditch, affecting an exaggerated caution; and when they had nearly reached their destination, he suddenly seized Kit by the sleeve and dragged him into the shadow of a shanty which they were passing.

"H'st!" he cautioned. "Somebody's a-comin'!"

Kit listened. He heard the sucking of feet drawn out of the mud.

"You have sharp ears, if not keen wits," he said, guardedly.

Instead of replying, Luny tightened his grip on Kit's arm, to enjoin silence upon him.

"Here's a great go!" said Kit to himself, feeling rather foolish. "I wonder which is the greater idiot—this addle-pate for playing hide-and-seek with imaginary villains, or I for falling in with the game."

It was soon apparent that two men were approaching, and that one of them was intoxicated.

"I say, boss," hiccupped the latter, "you must be carryin' too much ballast above the water-line. Brace up, ole man, ur you'll have the pair of us in the mud."

"Caramba! What would you?" said the other, with affected gayety. "Come, my friend; let us lean here against the house until we get breath."

Luny jerked at Kit's sleeve.

"That's the snoozer!" he whispered, excitedly.

By getting their bodies in a line with a shanty wall illuminated by the light from a neighboring saloon, Kit made out a man in the garb of a Mexican, holding another on his feet by the collar of his coat.

"I say, pardner," mumbled the sot, lurching away from his companion, so that, if let go, he would have fallen upon his back, "you're the jolliest ole Greaser I ever run with. D'ye know that? Shoot me with yer pocket-pistol—do!"

He who had called himself Don Felipe Ravi-ero—for it was indeed he—struggled with his companion to the wall of the shanty adjoining that beneath which Luny and Californy Kit crouched. Leaning him against it, he handed him his flask of liquor.

"Make yourself merry, *Senor Jose*," said the Spaniard, not resenting the other's good-natured insolence.

"Hozay be blowed!" growled the inebriate.

"Can't you call me Jo, like a Christian?"

Then, while he waved the flask about with a very uncertain hand, he proceeded to sing:

"Not fur Jo—oh, dear, no!
Not fur Joseph, ef he—"

"Gently, my friend!" cautioned Don Felipe, seizing his arm, apparently to save the liquor, but really to divert him from his boisterousness. "That liquor deserves a better destination than to be poured out in the mud. Drink—to long life and success to our undertaking!"

"Undertaker be blowed!" hiccupped Jo.

"This hyar don't lay no galoot out fur the undertaker."

And he steered the flask to his mouth with some difficulty.

"That's got the tang to it!" he declared, as he paused to catch breath. "I say, pard, I'm goin' fur to camp down right hyar with this thing, fur all night, ur until it gives out, ur I do. Ef you don't like it, you kin go—"

"But nothing is more to my humor, friend Joseef."

"It's lucky we're both o' the same mind," mumbled Jo.

And he deliberately slid down the wall until he sat on the ground.

The Spaniard looked about warily, as if to assure himself that there was no one within ear-shot; and then said, in a lowered voice:

"You do not go on to-night?"

"Eh? Go on? Go nothin'!" granted the Baby, for the inebriate Jo was no other. "Do I have the look of it, pardner?—let alone the road," he added. "We don't make that thar road in the night, ye understand."

"But thar's that leetle one," he continued, becoming garrulous, "bless her pooty white face an' winnin' ways!—she'd take it all in, rain ur shine. T'other one, she says—Don't go a-temptin' o' Providence. It's a Lord's mercy, she 'lows, as has saved their necks so fur; an' the road won't run away before mornin'—no more it won't, nur Canvas City, nuther."

"It is your passengers of whom you speak?"

"Bet yer sweet life!"

"They are many?"

"Waal, now, you *would* allow as one of 'em was a good many!"

And with this introduction the Baby told all about his passengers.

Californy Kit was puzzled. Did the Spaniard seek to draw this information from the drunken stage-driver; or was he only talking aimlessly with him, pending his humor to sit there in the street?

Without bluntly asking leading questions, he certainly got all the information he could have desired, if he were really interested in the women.

When he sought to persuade the inebriate to go on, Kit dismissed the half-formed suspicion; but when, forced to abandon the Baby, he walked by the Mountaineer's Rest and glanced up at its windows, the feeling of doubt returned.

Whether the women were or were not the objects of his interest, it became apparent that he was prosecuting some sort of investigation on the sly; for, after a moment's consideration, and a furtive glance about him, he entered the house, not going into the public bar, but into the unlighted passage which separated the tavern proper from the dance and drinking-hall.

Now thoroughly roused, Kit turned to his companion.

"Here! make yourself scarce," he commanded. "I'll run this thing without your help; and I don't want your hindrance."

Thus coolly "shaking" the youth who had "put him up to the thing," Kit followed the Spaniard into the house.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST MEETING.

CALIFORNKY KIT was just in time to hear the rustle of female garments, the wearers of which were feeling their way along the darkened hall, and Miss Prouter's voice, declaring irritably:

"It's that strappin' Mohawk that's done it. I put a candle-end down here, so's we could see not to bump our noses ag'in' the door-post. I'll even up with her before I quit the place; or all the Prouter blood in my veins has turned to water!"

"Pray do not make any further disturbance," pleaded the sweeter voice of her companion.

"Don't you worry. I know how to manage these critters."

Then she threw open the door of the dining-room, from which streamed a bar of light across the passage.

It disclosed the Spaniard—Don Diablo, to give him the name with which he had made the mountain country ring—shrinking back, and lifting his *serape* so as to obscure the lower part of his face, his sombrero being drawn down over his eyes.

He might have retreated, but that the following of Kit at his heels put him between two fires.

The lady started and stared at this sinister intruder; then uttered a suppressed cry of alarm, and ran back the way she had come.

Miss Prouter stood her ground, stiffening herself defiantly.

"Who air you; an' what d'ye want?" she demanded.

"Pardon, senora!" apologized the Spaniard, bowing low and backing away. "I have startled you."

"Me!—startled me?" cried Miss Prue, with fine scorn. "You're mightily mistook, mister!"

"Prue! Prue!" called the lady, in a quavering voice.

"Don't you worry, Miss Musgrave," began the spinster.

But she was interrupted by a warning ejaculation from the lady, who could be heard making her way up the darkened stairs.

"Miss Musgrave!" repeated Kit to himself, with a thrill at the heart. "She is unmarried!"

But he had terner business on hand than love-making, just then.

"Hold, senor!"

And Kit placed his hand on the shoulder of the retreating Spaniard, who had already got beyond the direct range of the light issuing from the dining-room.

"I beg your pardon," said Don Diablo, in the tone in which one resents an impertinence.

"I beg yours!" Kit repeated after him, in the tone in which one maintains a purpose.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"Allow me to see your face."

"My face?"

"I wish to know you when I see you again."

"By what right—"

"A common one in this country—a right that admits of no debate. Need I be more explicit?"

Much more readily than Kit expected, the Spaniard yielded, with a shrug.

"It is a fair exchange," he said. "I shall wish to know to whom I'm indebted for this interference."

And walking into the flood of light he took off his sombrero with a mock flourish and then fixed his dark eyes on Kit's face.

Kit met those level glances without emotion, either one way or the other.

He saw that he was facing no ordinary "Greaser." This man, whatever else he might be was no poltroon.

He was the finest specimen of a Mexican that Kit had ever seen. He was a bold and handsome cavalier; albeit one who might or might not play the gentleman, as it suited his humor.

"I am satisfied," said Californy Kit. "If you are not—"

"Perfectly!" interrupted the Spaniard—"and charmed to find the ladies have so prompt a champion."

"Senora!" turning to Miss Prue, "you will receive my apology for having inadvertently—"

"La! Ye needn't take on fur me!" declared Miss Prue, eying him keenly.

"But the senora, your companion. You will bear my respects to her, and my regrets?"

"There ain't no apologies necessary, if there ain't; an' if there is, you can't make 'em as'll be acceptable," said Miss Prue, with a very stiff spine and prim lips.

It seemed to Kit that she was suspicious of the Spaniard, without being quite certain of her ground.

Don Diablo showed his teeth in a satirical smile, shrugged his shoulders, and bowed low, in mock complaisance.

"The senora is pleased to be severe," he said.

"I hope to have opportunity in the future to win her respect, if not her good-will."

Was this a covert menace?

Californy Kit may have shown his suspicion in his face; for as the Spaniard turned, his lips writhed apart again, and his eyes glittered with an intelligence that was devilish.

"Stay!" he ejaculated, arresting his progress as he was on the point of passing Kit.

"Well?" said Kit, with cold, hard, steely peremptoriness.

"We should not part without a memento of this interesting occasion."

"I have no need or desire for a reminder."

"But I? By my faith! it is not every day that a hand is laid on my shoulder as you have had the kindness to lay yours."

"Through no fault of yours, I'll wager."

"Still, it is a new experience. I beg of you!"

And slipping a heavy gold ring from his finger he tendered it to Kit.

"Do you think that I will wear that—"

"Suspended over your heart, if you please."

"For what purpose?"

"I may some day have occasion to show you how neatly a dagger can be driven through it without scratching the metal."

"Ha! I'll accept that!"

"You honor me."

And the ring passed.

"But, hold, sir!"

"At your service, senor."

"You shall not outdo me in courtesy."

"You double my obligation to you, senor."

"I beg you to accept this poor return."

And detaching a charm from his watch-guard, Californy Kit extended it toward the other.

It was a locket, round, and about the size of a silver quarter-dollar.

"Gracias! A thousand thanks!"

And the recipient bowed low.

"And this?"

"You will oblige me by wearing it over your heart."

"As a talisman, no doubt!"

"That I may show you a little trick of legerdemain, one of these days."

"A trick?"

"Of turning the locket into a ring," said Kit, significantly.

"Ah! Senor is a magician? Believe me, I shall await your performance with great interest. *Adios!*"

And bowing once more, he passed Kit, and disappeared in the darkness.

As he followed him out, Kit thought he heard a hysterical sob from the direction of the stairway, where, during his colloquy with Don Diablo, a deathlike silence had prevailed.

"Was she startled by an accidental encounter; or has she reason to fear him?" was the question Kit was left to ponder.

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN IN THE CASE.

INTO Slabtown, about the hour when only the earliest risers were up, dashed a rider at break-neck speed.

He drew rein before the stables of The Last Ditch, leaped from the saddle, made a hurried examination until he recognized Don Diablo's horse, hastened into the hotel, and demanded to be shown to the Spaniard's room.

A minute later they had their heads together in whispered consultation, like the plotters they were.

"Well, out with it!" said the Don, seeing the suppressed excitement of his visitor.

"It's Fancy Flo," said the man, yet panting from his rapid ride.

"What about her?" demanded Don Diablo, with a sudden flaming up of his passionate nature.

"She's played it low down on ye, cap'n. The minute your back was turned she shook the whole business."

"What do you mean?"

"Threw up her hand, I say. Cut stick, an' run fur it."

"Nonsense! I left them all right together last night."

"That's so, boss. But you won't find 'em as you left 'em. The boys 'lowed as I'd better come an' put you up to what was goin' on, an' hyar I be."

"But what has happened? What is the matter with the girl?"

"That I can't say, by rights, Cap. She jest comes to me about midnight, an' she says, says she:

"Tell the Don as thar's a chance fur him to git a better hand to do his dirty work. I'm out o' the game!"

"She was lookin' wild, an' red 'round the weepers. She had one o' Jim's bosses, an' by the look of her saddle-bags I dropped to what she was up to."

"Hold on, Flo," says I. "Whar air you agoin' to?"

"Whar you nor none o' your gang won't see me no more!" says she.

"An' then she cuts her lucky, an' lets out fur parts unknown."

"But why didn't you stop her?" cried the Don, with a savage oath.

"Stop her?" repeated the other, as if the proposal struck him as rather "cheeky."

"Yes, stop her!" insisted the Don. "She is absolutely necessary to me. To lose her now will break up the whole combination."

"How would you stop her, boss, ef you was me?" was next asked, quietly.

"Why, clap on to her, and tie her up, if necessary!"

The other ran his finger round inside the neck of his woolen shirt, as if to loosen it—a significant gesture.

"Hwaal, boss," he said, dryly, "thar's cleaner records up in Canvas City than Bill Sligo's; an' he ain't jist ready, he ain't, fur to stir the boys up keerless. They're jest a-itchin' fur to give somebody a hornpipe lesson up thar, anyway, an' it's like to be 'fust come fust sarved!'"

Don Diablo replied with only an oath.

While Bill Sligo had been telling him of the flaw in his plans, he had been dressing hurriedly.

"Come!" he said. "We have no time to lose."

He led the way, and had Sligo see to the instant saddling of his horse, while he settled with Handsome Hank and swallowed a cup of coffee, some bacon, and a biscuit or two.

Then into the saddle and away!

"It was after midnight, you said?" he asked.

"Yes."

"The rain must have been over by that time."

It was here.

"You had the last of it."

"Then I shall be able to trail her down. You weren't fool enough to let her go without learning which way she went, I suppose?"

"She took the Silver Pass road."

"That's all I want to know. Now do you go and keep things moving till I show up."

Taking a branch road toward the south, he left Bill Sligo to return to Canvas City alone.

"I'm as well pleased that it ain't me he's after," muttered the prudent individual.

For hours Don Diablo rode with set lips, uttering not a sound, and keeping his eyes straight before him. He was the picture of implacable resolve.

A good judge of horsemanship would have seen that he managed the animal he bestrode so as to get out of it all possible speed, consistent with saving its strength for a long and wearisome chase.

At last his way crossed a mountain road into which he turned, eagerly scanning the ground.

He must have found what he sought in tracks that indicated the passage of a single rider since the storm had washed the roadway clean, for, with an ejaculation of satisfaction, he gave his horse the spur and pushed on at increased speed.

"Good! good!" he cried again. "The beast has gone lame. Ha! my lady, you'd give me the slip, would you? Well, you will learn, one of these days, that that isn't so easy a matter!"

There was a savage light in his eyes as he spoke which boded no mercy to the object of his quest.

Later his eager eye caught sight of an object moving before him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" rung out his cruel laugh.

The crags caught it up and repeated it, as if a host of hidden demons were sharing with him his heartless triumph.

A girl who was mounted on a limping horse turned her head so as to look over her shoulder at him.

She had been pale before, and anxious, and her beautiful face traced with the lines of trouble. About her eyes—such eyes as one would think were made for only gayety and tenderness—there were unmistakable signs of weeping.

But now there came into them a look of hunted terror. She uttered a low cry of dismay and despair.

"Oh, what shall I do? what shall I do?" she panted.

What she did was to urge her horse to increased speed, though she knew that it was useless.

The beast labored painfully; the woman appealed to him in tones of pathetic encouragement; behind them their pursuer laughed in heartless triumph.

At every bound he gained upon them, until the fugitive drew rein and turned her horse to face him.

"I'll kill you! I'll never go back!" she cried, almost sobbing in her desperation.

"Oh, no you won't; and, oh, yes you will!" replied the Don, betraying no fear of her menacing attitude.

He rode straight up to her, not offering to draw a weapon, or in any way to protect himself.

However, he too drew up when his horse's head was within a yard of hers.

"Now, my beauty," he said, coolly, "what's the trouble?"

CHAPTER VIII.

FANCY FLO.

"I'm sick of the job," replied the girl, dejectedly; "and I'm out of the game."

"It took two to go into it, didn't it?" asked Don Diablo.

"Yes."

"Well, you'll find that it will take two to back out!"

She did not reply. She only sat on her guard, watching him with a look as if she felt that in the end she would be forced to yield to his superior will.

"Now, let's talk this thing over quietly," he proposed. "You have tried to shake me. That was your privilege. I bear no malice. I don't ask or expect any one to stand by me any further than I can force them to keep their contract. The point is, that I can't be dropped until I'm ready. And now I ask you again, what's the trouble?"

"And I tell you that I won't do your dirty work any longer. As long as I live I shall curse the day that I sold myself to you!"

There was a wild, hysterical sob in her voice.

"But you did sell yourself to me, and got your price!"

"I will return you the money. I did not think of it, or I would have left it with Bill Sligo."

"Thank you—I have no need for it. It is your service that belongs to me; and that's what I insist upon receiving."

"You never will!"

"We'll see about that! Meanwhile, you haven't answered my question. What's the reason you changed your mind all of a sudden? You were keen enough after the chance when I left you."

"The more fool I!" sobbed the girl, feeling the hopelessness of a continued struggle against the iron persistence of the man before her. "But I didn't know then what I know now."

"And what do you know now?"

"That I love the man I was betraying."

"Love him—and run away from him! Well, that's a woman's logic, with a vengeance!"

"It is a woman's logic. Do you think I would aid in destroying his happiness when—"

"Happiness! Yes, yes! he is a happy fellow. I had forgotten that. Ha! ha!"

"He would be—he might still be—but for your villainy!"

"Say!" cried the Don, with sudden intensity.

"Did you give him the tip before coming away?"

"It is like you, to believe that all are traitors like yourself. Would you sell out your mother, I wonder?"

"Well, that depends. But, did you give him the tip?"

"No."

"For love of me, I suppose! Ha! ha! ha! But there!—I don't care for your reasons. But you are needlessly sacrificing yourself. The lady to whom you are so magnanimously ready to give him up has unexpectedly found a lover—a better man than he by a good way; and she isn't so keen after him as she was."

"Whom has she found?"

"Californy Kit."

"I believe you are lying to me."

"But you *hope* I am not! Ha! ha! Come, Flo! You've got on your high boss, and that's all right; but you're doing a thing that no woman in her senses ever thought of doing before. All's fair in love and war, you know. But suppose all your fine notions about treachery are correct; where's the harm? Don't you give him as good as you take from him? Can't he be as happy with you as with her? And then, he isn't breaking his heart after her. I'll go a blind that he's been making love to you?"

The girl dropped her face into her hands.

"There! there!" cried her tempter, triumphantly.

But she lifted her face again with a flash.

"No! no!" she protested. "It isn't that he loves me. But he *trusts* me. He said that he had thought he never would trust a woman again; but that I had conquered him, and he believed in me."

"Ha! ha! ha! We all say that. Why, I've lied that way myself, a hundred times. All the same, my dear, we don't trust the best of you out of our sight. But *this* is plain, at any rate—his heart wasn't irreparably broken, if he can find a comforter within six months of the tragic event!"

"But she is true to him. You said so."

"Excuse me! I said she was an arrant flirt."

"But her following him proves—"

"That she has a very keen eye to the main chance!"

"He is not rich. It is she who is the heiress."

"He is rich in social position, if you please. That's what she threw away, as women so often do; and that's what she wants back, as they always do when they learn the truth of the old adage, that you can't eat your cake and keep it—unless you're unusually smart! If she goes back with a husband, she will be well received. Money covers a multitude of sins; and the world only wants a plausible show for saying that it was one of those mistakes which will happen in the best regulated families. But if she goes back without a husband—well, the old maids, and some young ones too who have had to play wall-flower when she was about, will make her unpleasantly acquainted with that proverbial cold day when one gets left."

"Can you prove this?"

"Well, you can come and see for yourself. This much is true:—she has caught on to Californy Kit at Slabtown, and I nearly had a bout with him. I should have seen what he was worth, but it occurred to me that he would be useful in case my first scheme failed. But, you mustn't expect too much. She won't be fool enough to parade him around under the nose of her jealous lord. I don't pretend to predict just how a woman will play her cards; but this much I confidently count on—you will only have to keep your eyes open to see that she keeps him on the string."

Don Diablo was bluffing Fate. What he really counted upon, was that Californy Kit was sufficiently impressed to follow the lady to Canvas City. His mere presence, whether sanctioned by her or not, would give color to this charge.

Even failing this, he spoke with the boldness of one who was willing to stake all upon the correctness of his conviction. He believed that the wish of the impulsive woman with whom he had to deal would readily find confirmation of his words.

"May God forgive you if you are deceiving me!" she said, eying him still suspiciously.

"I'll take the chance of that. Come on!" he said, wheeling his horse toward Canvas City. "We have no time to lose. You must be in Canvas City and in Jim Carsdale's company when my lady arrives."

The woman yielded with a heart fluttering between a wild hope and a helpless despair.

"But look you!" said the Don, with an intense ferocity under an unmoved exterior, as she rode at his side, "if you throw off on me now, I'll kill you, so help me God!"

The menace did not affect the woman.

"If I conclude to sell you out," she said quietly, "nothing that you can do will make any difference. You ought by this time to know me better than to suppose that personal fear is my strongest motives."

"All right," he replied. "I'll take that chance."

Then they rode on in silence.

But they had proceeded only a few miles when Don Diablo suddenly drew rein.

"Hah!" he ejaculated. "On my life, if there isn't Jim himself! He's come after you!"

Fancy Flo looked up with a start, with real alarm depicted on her beautiful though sad countenance.

"Where? where?" she panted.

"Look! Listen!"

Don Diablo pointed through the foliage of some trees in the shadow of which they had pulled up.

The clattering hoofs of a horse at full gallop could be heard, now that their own horses were still.

The sound came across an intervening valley; and on the distant mountain-side the girl caught sight of a rider whom she had no difficulty in recognizing.

"Ride for all you're worth! You must meet him on the other side of the Black Gulch trail!" cried Don Diablo, with an excitement which he seldom evinced. "There's where I came into this road. It will be all the easier for you if he doesn't see my tracks."

"But what shall I say to him? How can I explain my voluntary return?"

"I'll leave that to your ingenuity. You would discredit your sex, if you fail to close his eye. Go!—and good luck go with you!"

He struck her horse a cut with his riding-whip, and reined his own horse into the undergrowth at the side of the road.

Fancy Flo rode forward, passed the Black Gulch trail in time, and on beyond drew rein before her pursuer.

At sight of her, he uttered a fierce oath, and drew a revolver.

She sat perfectly still, and only gazed at him with tender reproach in her eyes, as he came on.

"If he kills me," she said to herself, "perhaps it will be the most blessed thing that could come to me. Only—only—I wish he might believe in me, and he said he did!"

CHAPTER IX.

A DEADLY PERIL.

"You're a sweet sucker, you be, fur to make Canvas City to-day!"

"Tha's all right! You fix me O. K., Lan. Tha's the part of a frien' an' a zgentleman an' a sch—hic—kolar."

"You're too bad fixed already!"

Lan had dragged his guest out of his bunk, lying just as he had tumbled into it the night before, with his feet where his head ought to be.

However, there was no ill-nature in his reproach.

"Lend a hand hyar, boys," he said, cheerfully. "We must git the kinks out o' this hyar galoot's brain."

There was no lack of volunteers; and they soon had the inebriate under the pump, two holding him while a third plied the handle with a right good will, to the not slight amusement of a choice circle of spectators.

But the Baby took their chaff all in good part.

"You know how it is yourselves, you cacklin' roosters!" he said.

And they were fain to acknowledge the truth of his retort.

A breakfast of "hog-meat" and biscuit that smelled to heaven of soda was washed down with a muddy brown compound which, by a long stretch of courtesy, passed under the name of coffee.

This was "nailed down with a snifter;" the Baby was set on the box; and with a grand flourish of his whip he drove off in a cloud of dust, for Canvas City.

Californy Kit stood looking after the coach.

He had lifted his hat as the ladies passed him. Miss Prouter had glared at him, and then passed on without recognition. But the other!—her glorious eyes had met his for an instant, and she had bent her graceful head with a modest graciousness that was enchanting.

Was that the end? he was asking himself, when he felt his sleeve plucked:

"Say, pard!"

He turned, to confront Luny.

"He tuck that thar way, airly this mornin'," said the boy. "He ain't up to no good, he ain't."

"What do you know about him?" asked Kit, on a sudden impulse.

"Ho! I don't know nothin'—I don't!" replied the imbecile with a chuckle.

But then his face changed, as he looked in the direction in which the coach had gone. His eyes glittered, and his fingers worked convulsively.

Californy Kit watched him, wondering what secret lay hidden in that clouded brain.

"Ye see, boss," he said, suddenly turning with almost his usual aspect, "I hain't got the gall. More'n that, I hain't got the head-piece. I know that! It'll take a mighty peart chap to git away with Don Diablo. I ain't ready fur him—not yit I ain't. I say! d'ye see this hyar?" and lifting the matted hair from his temple, he disclosed a hideous scar, long since cicatrized.

"How did you come by that?" asked Kit.

Luny looked at him and laughed.

"You pick him up," he said, ignoring the question. "Ef you don't, you'll be out!"

And with this warning, accompanied by a mysterious look, he took himself off.

Californy Kit frowned.

"What the deuce is the matter with me?" he asked himself. "What is there in it, after all?"

Kit went into the bar, showing his disgust in his troubled look.

"What's sourin' on yer stomach, ole man?" asked Lan Lonslow sympathetically.

"Nothing," replied Kit shortly, and walked out of the bar.

Lan looked after him with a peculiar smile.

"Hit him whar he lives, fu'st clatter!" he said to himself. "Curi's how it takes a man. No two jist alike."

A few minutes later, as soon as he was disengaged, he followed Kit, intending to quiz him slyly, but as he reached the piazza, he ejaculated:

"Eh! What? Waal, I swear!"

He stood with his mouth open, staring after Kit's departing figure. He was riding away, taking the road to Canvas City.

"Ha! ha! ha!" chuckled Lan.

"Ha! ha!" came an answering laugh at his elbow.

Lan turned, to see Luny, apparently greatly excited with delight.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

But the imbecile only looked at his interrogator with his peculiar, mysterious smile. He had an odd way of neglecting to answer a question.

"I say, Lan," he replied, abruptly dropping his voice to a confidential tone, "you hain't got a hoss what you'd be willin' to let me have fur a matter o' twenty-four hours?—have ye, now?"

"A hoss? Waal, now, you've got a cheek, you have! What in Cain would you do with a hoss, I'd like to know?"

Ignoring the question, Luny persisted:

"You'll let me have him, Lan—eh?—fur ole times."

"Waal, you'll go on Shank's mare a long time before you git ary hoss out o' me!"

And without more ado Lan went into the house, leaving Luny looking wistfully after him and then down the road toward Canvas City.

Meanwhile, the ladies had the coach to themselves, there being no other passengers that trip.

Mrs. Musgrave—her companion had mislaid Californy Kit, by pronouncing the matronly title "Miss," as is not uncommon in New England—looked pale and agitated.

"Now, don't you take on," said Miss Prue. "If I was a-bettin', I'd bet the world wa'n't comin' to an end to-day, nor to-morrer."

"But to be so near him!" murmured the other lady. "What shall I say? How will he receive me?"

"Bad enough, I guess! It does beat all how some folks gets all in a pucker about men-critters. I swan! ef I had one o' em to deal with, he'd walk a chalk line! His hull eternal body—"

"Don't, Prue—please don't!" pleaded her companion. "I want to talk to you about it. I feel as if, when I stand before him, my tongue will

cleave to the roof of my mouth. I shall only be able to cast myself at his feet, and wait for him to lift me up—"

"Ur walk over ye!" snorted Miss Prue, with fine scorn.

But Mrs. Musgrave had her face bowed in her handkerchief, her frame trembling with emotion.

"He loved me so!" she sobbed. "It was all my fault!"

"Oh, yes! that's the old song! If he had me to love fur a spell, I'd—"

"Whoop!" came a bellowing voice from without the coach. "G'lang thar, you ole snoozers!"

There was the crack of a whip, like a pistol-shot; and the coach bounded forward as if its wheels were about to be jerked from under it, and swayed and rocked so that the occupants were thrown with considerable violence against the sides.

"What's that?" cried Mrs. Musgrave, starting up in alarm.

"That drunken fool of a driver," said Miss Prue. "He's one o' the beauties o' Western travel."

"But it is not safe! Oh, look!"

In their preoccupation they had not noticed how precipitous their way had become. Now they could see nothing but a sheer wall of the primeval rock on one side, while they looked out over a gulf of unknown depth on the other.

Besides, they were going down a steep grade at a furious pace.

"Wake snakes!" yelled the Baby, sending his long lash once more out over the backs of his flying horses.

"Oh, we shall be killed!" cried Mrs. Musgrave.

The color left Miss Prudence Prouter's face. She could face a "man-creeter" without blenching; but here was a peril for which she was not prepared.

Without a word she opened the door of the vehicle, and at the risk of being thrown out, thrust forth her head and half her body.

The Baby was rocking from side to side in his place, with the swaying of the coach, and as she looked at him he had his head thrown back and an inverted black bottle at his lips.

"Whoop!" he yelled again, as he withdrew the empty bottle; and with sheer recklessness he threw it so that it was splintered to a thousand fragments against the rocks.

"Whoop! whoop! shake the tucks out o' them thar legs o' yours! Scat, ye creeters!"

"See here, mister!" cried Miss Prue.

"Whoop!" yelled the Baby, looking down at her with a leer. "Is that you, ole gal? How's this hyar! Talk 'bout Hank Munk! He ain't nowhar, he ain't! Jest ketch on to this hyar! Git out o' that!"

And once more his whip cracked about the ears of his plunging leaders.

"How's this hyar fur gilt-edged drivin'? Go West, young man, ef ye want to l'arn how to handle the ribbons."

"I say! Hadn't you better pull them animiles o' yours up a mite?" asked Miss Prue.

"Wha' do ye soy?" demanded the Baby, as he leaned over, as if to catch her words.

With a shriek of terror, the spinster threw herself back into the coach.

In dumb dismay Mrs. Musgrave saw a dark object pass downward by the window.

"He's killed!" cried Miss Prue, wildly. "He has fallen off the coach!"

Her next thought was an equally terrible one. "Lord o' mercy, what's to become of us?"

CHAPTER X.

A WILD RIDE.

FOLLOWING a ledge far up the mountain-side, Californy Kit found himself on one curve of a horse-shoe, so that he could look across the intervening gulf and see the coach opposite.

The Baby was lashing his horses, running them up a considerable grade.

"The fellow has been drinking since he left the station!" exclaimed Kit. "Good heavens! if he has lost his senses, he's in no condition to make the down grade on the other side."

"Whoop!" came a cry across the gulf.

Californy Kit instantly put spurs to his horse, goading him forward with merciless persistence.

"It's no use!—it's no use!" he said to himself. "He'll make the ride before I can get to him! Curse his folly, and mine for not interfering when he set out. He was in no condition even then."

Round the horseshoe swept our hero like the wind; but he was too late, as he had predicted.

When he reached the highest point, where the grade descended, he could hear the rattle of the coach echoed by the surrounding cliffs, but no longer the voice of its driver.

On he spurred, and a little further down came to an explanation of this.

"My God!" he ejaculated.

There in the road lay the unconscious body of the drunken stage-driver.

"Without a driver! with the brake swinging loose!" cried Kit, all the blood in his body seeming to rush back on his heart.

But he rose with the occasion. His white lips took a resolute set—his eyes flashed fire—he settled himself in his stirrups, and sped on down a

way where the slightest stumble might precipitate both him and his horse to death.

It seemed long enough to suffer a thousand deaths before he came up with the flying coach, but he did at last.

There he witnessed the most appalling spectacle of his life—a coach swaying and bounding as if it might momentarily be overturned, at the heels of four runaway horses in full career, going down a way which required the most careful driving at the best of times.

How could he stop them? If he could get upon the coach, the reins would be out of his reach, trailing on the ground.

There was but one thing for it—he must pass the coach and get at the heads of the flying horses.

There he might do some good, or he might only precipitate the danger.

To wait for a favorable spot and pass between the coach and the cliff would be the safest for him, though even such an attempt was fraught with peril that few men would dare.

But his sudden appearance beside them might force the stage horses outward; and he shuddered to think of the result of the slightest deviation from the middle of the road.

To pass outside the coach was to run the risk of having his own horse forced over the brink.

Without a moment's hesitation Californy Kit resolved on his course.

He knew the road well. There was a spot where, curving outward, it was a little wider than elsewhere. If this was passed without his gaining the front of the coach, he might as well abandon all hope of accomplishing anything.

Reaching the spot, he set his teeth, and spurred ahead.

There was a moment—it seemed an age—of breathless suspense, in which any head but his would have been turned. It was as if he were sailing through the air, with a thousand feet of empty space yawning to receive him!

As he passed the open window of the coach, he caught a glimpse of a white face framed in the sash. His eyes met the eyes that he had already learned to love.

Another mad bound, and—

He felt his horse's hinder parts sinking under him!—he had a dizzy glimpse of the gulf!—he heard a piercing shriek!

There was a furious scrambling struggle, and—he was safe!

Safe?—with his horse wedged against the nigh wheeler, in his terror at the danger he had so narrowly escaped? Safe?—with a heavy coach rumbling and roaring at his heels, threatening at every moment to be thrown over the cliff, to drag everything with it in its fearful descent? What if a horse were to stumble and fall?

But the man did not give these things a thought.

With difficulty he got his leg from between the horses' bodies, climbed upon his saddle, and made a transit to the back of the stage horse.

Here was a new danger to be considered. If he drove his horse ahead, running free, he would incite the frantic leaders to wilder efforts. If he kept the animal back, it might at any moment be forced over the cliff, or by crowding the stage horses might force them so near the cliff as to bring a hub in contact with some projecting rock.

Californy Kit took the latter risk, and addressed himself to the task of pulling up the horses.

He soon found that, pressed as they were by the free-running coach, this was impossible. His only hope was to check as far as possible their wild career, and direct their course so as to avoid striking obstacles.

And now began a heroic struggle with human courage and skill against the powers of destruction.

His first point was to let the horses know that they were under firm guidance. Then by sheer strength he forced his leaders to run with slack harness, and where the roadway would permit he curbed his wheelers to check the impetus of the coach; where there was danger of throwing them, he allowed them a freer rein.

It was a fearful ride. The slightest accident would be fatal. He cast his memory over the road ahead. Was there any place round which he could go at that speed, and keep the coach on its wheels?

At each inward curve he listened, not daring to look back, in momentary expectation of hearing the crash of the coach against the cliff; at each outward curve he held his breath, dreading a flight out into that yawning space!

A score of times he involuntarily closed his eyes; again and again it seemed to him that the wheels on one side or the other lifted from the ground.

Two miles he rode with his heart in his mouth; and then, summoning all his strength, he drew in his panting and quivering horses at a point where a slight rise checked the impetus of the coach, which thus far had pressed them on resistlessly.

He dismounted, but had to steady himself for a moment, seized with dizziness as his feet touched the ground.

He was as pale as death. An icy sweat oozed from every pore, and stood in glistening beads

on his forehead. The least moved man is not always the most courageous. Realizing the deadly peril, he had leaped into the jaws of death, and braved all.

He went and opened the coach door. His voice was perfectly steady, as he said:

"Madam, I hope you will not allow yourself to be needlessly disturbed by what has happened. You are perfectly safe. You need not even dismount from the coach, unless you prefer."

His words were addressed to Miss Prouter.

That lady sat and stared at him dumbly. Her extreme pallor showed that she had some realization, though probably not a complete one, of the danger through which they had passed.

But his eye instantly sought the other.

She lay white and limp in a corner of the coach.

"Your companion!—she is not hurt?" he exclaimed, anxiously.

"No—no. It's only a faintin' fit, I guess," Miss Prouter answered, in a tone which was new for her.

"Allow me!" and springing into the stage, Kit lifted the unconscious lady in his arms, and descended with her to the ground.

"If you will spread a shawl just there," he said, indicating the spot with his foot.

The submissiveness with which Miss Prouter obeyed him was a revelation.

"Thankee, sir!—thankee!" she said, hurriedly carrying out his instruction.

He laid the lady on an incline, so that her head was somewhat lower than her body.

"There is no water accessible," he said; "but it is unnecessary. She will revive in a moment. You are sure she has not been thrown against the side of the coach and hurt?"

"It was rough ridin'," admitted Miss Prouter; "but it 'u'd a' been rougher but fur you, mister. We owe you somethin'. 'Tain't everybody as 'u'd a' been so handy."

Her manner said more than her words, but Kit waved off any acknowledgment.

"The lady is showing signs of recovery," he said. "It may be less embarrassing to her, if she does not find a stranger beside her when she wakes to consciousness. I will step back. But do not lift her head until she is entirely herself."

By the exercise of some nice skill, he turned the coach round; by which time Mrs. Musgrave was sitting up and waiting to receive him.

"How can I thank you?" she said, extending her hand.

"I beg that you will not try," he replied, with manifest embarrassment.

"But you risked your life. I saw how narrowly you escaped. For one terrible moment I thought that you were gone!"

She shuddered at the recollection, and unconsciously gripped his hand as she held it, as if to save him even yet.

"But it is over now. I hope that you were not hurt."

The lady was charmed by his modesty.

"I? Oh, no!" she said. "But our driver! He must have been killed! Can we not go and see if he is yet within reach of our help?"

"I have turned the coach round for that purpose. If you will not be anxious staying here, I will make you as comfortable as I can—"

"Oh, no. I will accompany you. I may be of some little use."

"You will not be afraid to venture back into the coach so soon?"

The lady looked at it, and shuddered involuntarily; then she turned her eyes to Kit's face trustingly.

"Not with you as a driver," she made answer, with a faint smile.

"Thank you!—thank you!" stammered Kit, dropping his eyes to hide from her the flash of delight that kindled in them.

He helped her into the coach, now without interference from Miss Prouter.

Indeed, he would have performed the same service for the spinster herself, but she "drew the line" at that point.

"I'm jest as much obleeged to ye, mister," she said, with a submissive graciousness in tone and manner that amused him not a little; "but the Prouters air fa'rous fur helpin' 'emselves."

They found the Baby yet lying unconscious in the mountain road. Luckily for him he had fallen between the coach and the cliff.

Mrs. Musgrave displayed the tenderest solicitude, yet with it a nerve that astonished Kit, while it added to his keen admiration for her. She turned pale at the sight of blood, but did not shrink from her task, even though it stained her fair hands.

Miss Prouter had not only the self-possession, but the deftness of an experienced nurse.

"He is pretty well shaken up," said Kit, after examination, "but I do not think that he has received serious injury. We can take him back to Slabtown, or, if you are anxious to go forward, there is a place a little further on where I can turn the coach and keep on to Canvas City."

"I am anxious to reach my destination," said Mrs. Musgrave, wistfully. "If you do not think that the distance—"

"There is little difference either way. We will go to Canvas City."

Then Mrs. Musgrave dismounted at her point of destination she found herself in the midst of the strangest city she had ever beheld. It was entirely of canvas! Five hundred souls—men and women, but no children—lived there like Arabs in tents. The Canvas City Hotel was a huge square pavilion that looked as if a good pull of wind would blow it away.

"May I know to whom I am so greatly indebted?" asked Mrs. Musgrave, holding out her hand in parting.

"My name is Charles Kittridge," said our hero; "but I am better known in this country as Californy Kit. If I can serve you in any way I hope that you will give me the privilege."

"You might help me, if you are disengaged in an hour from now," said the lady, hesitatingly.

Miss Prouter straightened her spine, and compressed her lips, but said nothing.

"I shall be entirely at your service. And I am to ask for—"

"Mrs. Musgrave."

Californy Kit was so delighted with the way circumstances appeared to be playing into his hands that he had dropped his eyes, lest they betray him.

But as the lady announced her matronly title he started so plainly, and flashed his eyes up to her face in such unspeakable dismay that her cheeks flamed scarlet.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered. "I will not fail."

And, bowing low, he turned and hurried away.

Miss Prouter uttered a snort of disapproval.

Mrs. Musgrave turned and walked swiftly into the hotel.

She was a beautiful woman. She had been a belle even before she was out of short dresses. It was not her fault if she knew the signs of at least one sort of emotion as an old salt knows the signs of fair and foul weather.

There was no need to tell her why Californy Kit had come to Canvas City, or why he had so much time on his hands to serve her.

The Canvas City Hotel was the one structure in the camp which rejoiced in a slab front, with doors and windows such as ordinarily belong to a human habitation, the side and rear walls being made of duck.

The hotel really consisted of two square pavilions, one of which was divided by muslin partitions into small sleeping apartments, with a larger dining-room and kitchen in the rear, while the other inclosed an unobstructed space, with the front half occupied by a bar and gambling tables, and the rear half given up to dancing.

As Mrs. Musgrave passed through the doorway leading into the hotel proper, her dress caught on a splinter, where the jamb bore the marks of a stray bullet as a memento of a "leetle diffikilty" of the night before.

She turned to free herself, when an uproar in the street caused her to lift her eyes.

What she saw drove the red tide of embarrassment from her cheeks, and left her staring with wild eyes and parted lips.

Swaying as if struck a mortal blow, she clutched the jamb of the door with one hand for support, while she pressed the other to her bosom with a sensation as if she were about to suffocate.

CHAPTER XI.

AT CROSS-PURPOSES.

JIM CARSDALE was a man of slight, rather elegant, build, with a thin, flexible face, jet-black hair and mustache, and black eyes that seemed to burn with an internal fire. His face was bloodless, and he had the look of a man who was half-insane with protracted dissipation and ravages of unbridled passions.

"So!" he cried, with wolfish ferocity—"you too!"

"Jim," said the woman, her voice, as her eyes, bespeaking only tender resignation, "if you're going to kill me, I'll receive it at your hands without a murmur."

"You will, will you?—you will, will you?" panted the man, trembling with passion, as if he longed to tear her with his nails, to sate his vengeance. "Curse you! you think you can come the honeyfugle dodge over me now that I have caught you!"

He drew the cock of his revolver back, its deadly "click! click!" sending fine thrills through the frame of his meditated victim.

"I'll make an example of you, as I did of the other! I'll kill you off one by one, as I have opportunity, to save some luckier man from your accursed perfidy!"

"Wait, Jim!—wait!" she pleaded.

"Hah! you're not so ready when you see that your little scheme is not going to work!"

"It isn't for myself, believe me! God knows, if I had thought of myself more, I should never have been where I am to-day!"

There was a tremulous sob in her voice now.

"Bah!" scoffed the man. "Do you think that I'm not up to that dodge too? Come! if you have any prayers to make, you'd better lose

no time about it. You'll never leave this spot alive—I've sworn it! I'll give you five minutes by the watch. If you think it will pay to try to pull the wool over my eyes or soften my heart—ha! ha! ha!—rather than put in the time making your peace with Heaven, you are at liberty to waste the effort."

"Didn't you get my note, Jim?"

"Oh, yes, I got your note fast enough."

"I told you the truth in it."

"And robbed me, to prove it!"

"I took the horse—that was all. I didn't believe that you would grudge me that."

The man laughed scornfully.

"Did you find the money?" she asked.

The man repudiated concern in the money with an impatient oath.

He kept his eye fixed upon the slowly-moving minute-hand of his watch.

"I didn't keep a cent of it," she went on, "fearing that you would think that I cared for it. I only say this now, so that when you are yourself you may think it over, and so come to believe that I loved you, and love you now, truly, and that I went away, as I said, only for your good. I want to feel that, when I am dead, you will some day believe in me again, as you said. Don't think then that I bear you any ill-will for this, Jim. Life hasn't been so sweet a thing to me that I should be much in love with it. I'd rather go to rest by your hand, than to go on now as I must go on if death doesn't come to me in some shape. I hope you'll come to know before I'm buried; and then I've only one favor to ask—that you will kiss my lips. I shall feel it just the same, though I can't return it. Don't—"

He had looked up, while she was speaking, with a puzzled expression. He now interrupted her.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

She did not comprehend him, and said nothing.

"The money!" he said, with an impatient frown.

The girl looked hurt at this seeming disregard of her tender sentiments—the last she should ever express to him.

"Is that all you care for?" she asked, in a heart-broken tone.

And the slow tears came into her eyes, and coarsed one by one heavily down her cheeks.

He was not insensible to her look of silent reproach. But it drove him furious.

"Curse you!" he cried—"can't you understand? I wish that all the money I ever saw—and you with it—was in Tartarus, before I ever gave you the chance to sell me out for the paltry dross! If you had told me you wanted it, I would have buried you under it, and kicked you out of my presence! But no!—that would deprive you of a chance to indulge your infernal propensity to lie, even when the truth would be a shorter road to your object. You must be fool me; you—"

But now the woman was shaken by a terrible anxiety. She clasped her hands, and appealed to him breathlessly.

"Wait! wait! Didn't you really get the money? I put it in your coat. Oh, I swear to you, I did! Somebody must have taken it out! Oh, believe me! believe me! Jim! Jim! I can't go down to death and leave you to think forever that I deliberately robbed you—and of money, when I would have given you my heart's blood! Don't believe that of me, Jim!—don't! don't! don't!"

In her distress she urged her horse forward, and reached out to lay hold of him with her trembling hands.

"Oh, it must be there! Did you look? God wouldn't let so cruel a thing happen!"

Again her words bewildered him, so that he did not repel her when she pressed her hands against his breast.

"See! see!" she cried, breathlessly. "It is there! I can feel it!"

And with trembling, eager fingers she sought to unbutton his coat.

"What is it?" he asked, taking the work out of her hands.

He thrust his hand into the pocket indicated, and drew forth a small package wrapped in a bit of newspaper.

"There! there!" she cried. "You will believe that much at least—that I did not deceive you for the sake of what there was to be made out of it."

He opened the package, to find that it contained a lot of bank bills of large denomination.

He looked at them as if he could scarcely realize what he held in his hand. Then he lifted his eyes to the face of the girl, who was smiling at him through her tears with glad tenderness.

"I wouldn't have touched one," she repeated, "for fear you should think it was for that that I had pretended to care for you."

Without speaking, he thrust his hand into a side pocket of his coat, and drew forth a crumpled letter.

It was such a letter as only a woman could write—a woman whose heart was wrung with anguish that no language could express. It was such a letter as might have been written in her heart's blood—all blistered and blurred with tears.

As he read it through again—which he did deliberately—the man's eyes became humid.

The woman waited, watching him with suspended breath. A new hope was struggling for birth in her heart; but she stifled it, not daring to believe that it might be true.

The man lifted his eyes from the letter to her face; and she seemed almost to swoon under his glance.

Silently he reached out, and put his arms about her.

She let her head sink on his breast and closed her eyes.

Only the deep, tremulous respiration with which her bosom rose and fell bore witness of the tide of emotion that overpowered her.

He lifted her from her saddle to the pommel of his own, drawing her into a closer embrace.

Her lips fell apart with a faint sigh.

He bent his head and kissed them, to feel their clinging response; and then as he looked at her face, he saw that its lines of pain had all relaxed, leaving a faint, scarcely perceptible smile of beatific repose.

It was very fair and delicate. The closed eyelids lay like white shells. The lips were soft and pulpy—so pale, but now, now so red with the rich blood that his caress had called back.

"Why did you go away, Flo?" he asked, tenderly.

"Because I loved you," she replied, like one answering out of a blissful dream.

"But you're going back now?"

She turned her face so as to press it closer to his breast, and raising one arm, slid it about his neck.

"I'll never doubt you again—never!" he said, with a fervor as intense as his passion had been.

A slight pressure of her fingers was her acknowledgment.

"Look up, pretty one!" he pleaded. "Won't you let me see your eyes?"

The lids fluttered apart in obedience to his wish. She gazed fixedly, with an unchanging smile, into the eyes that bent over her.

She had no use for speech. Words were too cheap to coin into them the wealth of her affection.

"This is what I have longed for all my life!" he cried, kissing her rapturously. "I'll see that you don't slip through my fingers again in a hurry, Miss Runaway!"

The nature of the man was manifest in his swinging over to the other extreme. He laughed with the gayety of a boy, as he caressed her with soft touches of the hand and lightsome, airy kisses. He lifted her hair and let it ripple over his face, kissing the strands as they passed his lips.

She did not take her eyes from his face, save when he pressed her eyelids down with his passionate lips.

"I mean to ride through the camp with you in this way!" he cried, as the idea struck him.

She laughed with the low, rippling merriment which comes so easily to the lips of happy love.

"Could you stand it?" he asked.

"Try me!" she replied, with bantering defiance.

"By Jove, I will!" he cried, delightedly.

"But this," he added, somewhat later, "though highly romantic and altogether to my liking, is hardly a comfortable position for you to ride in over the road that lies between here and Canvas City. I'll let you occupy your own saddle until we get in sight of the camp; but there I mean to hold you to your challenge."

"You're in a hurry to get rid of me," she said, with an affected pout. "Now I wish that we might ride on in this way for ever and ever."

"Don't you dare to accuse me of such lukewarmness!" he laughed.

But, eluding his closer embrace, she slipped to the ground.

He dismounted, lifted her into her own saddle, and then walked beside her with his arm about her waist; his words, his voice, and the changeable play of his features, bearing ample testimony to his ardor as a lover.

When they reached Canvas City, he made good his words, in spite of her laughing resistance.

And this was the spectacle that sent all the blood in Mrs. Musgrave's veins back upon her heart in an icy torrent:

The man whom she had crossed a continent to find, and to lay at his feet her wifely duty and the proofs of her truth, came tearing through the street of a Western mining-camp at break-neck speed, bearing a beautiful woman in his arms, firing his revolvers into the air on either hand, and yelling at the top of his voice, in the mad Bacchanalian revelry of that state of society in which all the ordinary restraints of civilization are set at defiance!

One thing the wife, being a woman, did not fail to note—the fatal beauty of her rival.

With her hair flying wild against the breast and over the shoulder of her bold Lochinvar, and even half-veiling his face; with her cheeks rosy with embarrassment at this unwonted exhibition though her eyes flashed a laughing defiance of criticism, Fancy Flo was a picture

to warm the heart of any man and chill the soul of any woman with whom she might come into rivalry.

With a snort of virtuous indignation and a glare of scorn that should have withered the subjects of her disapproval, Miss Prouter threw her arm about the unhappy wife, drew her into the house, and slammed the door with a will.

"There!" she said, with emphasis, "I hope you're satisfied!"

With only a moan Mrs. Musgrave sunk against the stanch, though stern, breast of her duenna.

But an effect of which she did not guess had been wrought.

Fancy Flo had seen the parting between Mrs. Musgrave and Californy Kit.

Kit she knew, and she instantly guessed who the lady was.

She saw the blood stream over Mrs. Musgrave's face. She saw Kit hurry away without looking back. She saw the lady's almost precipitate retreat into the house, and her extreme pallor, as, arrested in the doorway, she lifted her eyes and stared at the riders.

"Ha! caught in the act!" cried Flo to herself.

"She gave him warning, and he ran away without looking back, hoping to escape recognition! She, too, would have run to cover; but when she was stopped, my lady was in fine dismay! And it was for such as she that I would have crushed the very heart out of my body! I believe Don told the truth for once in his life, no doubt because it just served his turn. After this, I shall have no scruples!"

"Jim—dear Jim!" she murmured aloud.

And disregardful of the mountain-men, who were laughing and swinging their hats and cheering—withal envying her lucky possessor, she threw an arm about his neck and looked her devotion up into his eyes, which the caress attracted to her face.

Don Diablo, who was a witness to all this remarkable scene, rubbed his hands in glee.

"Ha! ha!" he chuckled, "the very fiends are playing into my hand!"

CHAPTER XII.

A LEAF OUT OF THE PAST.

A MOST startling change had been wrought in Jim Carsdale's appearance.

He looked as if, arrested in the midst of a prolonged yell, he had been suddenly turned to stone, and left with his mouth wide open, but breathless. His face, ghastly white, was rigid with the lineaments of horrified amazement. His eyes, distended so that the whites showed all round the irises, stared wildly at the figure in the doorway of the Canvas City Hotel. His finger was paralyzed on the trigger of his up-lifted revolver.

This spell of breathless immobility lasted but a moment, while he flashed by the hotel. Then his revolver spoke again, and his yell rung louder than ever.

He had been impelled by the imps of rough sportiveness. He was now possessed by a very devil of mad desperation and defiance.

He set Flo down before a tent which had the holiday appearance of a lawn marquee. It was round in form, and was made of striped duck, with an abundance of red-bound scallops fluttering in the wind. In gay contrast with the plain dog-tents that surrounded it, it might have been taken for the headquarters of a mediæval duke.

He would have dashed back into the crowd of laughing men who had cheered him as he passed, but Flo detained him.

"Wait, Jim!" she said. "Come in here with me."

He dismounted, and entered the tent with her.

Its interior furnishing and adornment were a marvel of ingenuity and taste. A board flooring made it unusually comfortable; and in everything the possibilities of tent life had been exhausted.

Jim Carsdale's first act was to take a long "pull" at a flask of spirits. He then manifested the restlessness of a caged tiger, pacing the narrow confines of the tent, clinching his hand, grinding his teeth, and working his features spasmodically.

"Jim," said his companion, "what's the matter?"

"Nothing!" he answered, shortly.

"I want you to tell me truly," she went on, after a pause, her voice hushed and unsteady—"am I standing between you and a wife who is worthy of you?"

He whirled upon her with a burst of profanity.

"I told you she was dead!" he cried. "I killed her with my own hand! I'd do it again, if I had the chance! Let her cross my path!"

It was plain to Flo that he had seen and recognized his wife, but that he was trying to convince himself that it was only a chance resemblance.

"Yes! yes!" she said, soothingly, shifting her ground with nice tact; "but there's her memory."

Jim execrated her memory.

"You never told me the particulars," persisted Flo. "Will you tell me now?"

He did not yield at once, but she wheedled him in her woman's way, until he suddenly seemed seized with a desire to justify himself in her eyes.

Then the story came out:

He had met the lady whom afterward he married, in New Orleans. She was a great belle, and, his friends warned him, an arrant flirt, a charge which he laughed off, hinting that his kind informants might be paying off some old scores of their own.

For the rest, there was but one thing of importance—there would be no flirting with him before marriage, nor with any one else after it. He would look out for that!

Among the knights in her train was one Captain Flood, of whom little was known, save that he appeared to be rich, and was well received in society. He had figured rather more conspicuously than others, because of an assertive way he had.

This man, if he had really gained her favor, Jim—whose true name was Horace Musgrave—had supplanted.

It so happened, Musgrave not being a resident of the Crescent City, and the other also being but a casual visitor, that the rivals never met, and were wholly unknown to each other by sight.

However, a rival belle managed to keep Musgrave informed of Captain Flood's movements in his absence, with such success as to cause a pretty warm scene between Musgrave and his affianced bride.

But this blew over, and the wedding took place with great eclat.

Flood was among the invited guests, and on this occasion these two men were to meet for the first time.

For some reason which Musgrave had never heard explained, Flood was not present at the ceremony in the church, and indeed did not make his appearance until the evening reception at the home of the bride was so well along that the ceremonies which pinned her to the side of her groom were passed.

Then the lady who had before played upon his jealousy had suddenly appeared to Musgrave with the startling assurance that she now had it in her power to prove the truth of her previous charge. His bride, with her vows yet warm on her lips, was then in confidential *tête-à-tête* with his rival! If he had the nerve to allow himself to be led to the spot, he could have ocular demonstration of his peculiar happiness.

How he got the pistol which he found in his hand when the occasion presented for using it, he did not know. His accommodating guide may have led him through a room where she had placed it, so that it would catch his eye and suggest its use.

At any rate, in a green-house he had come upon his bride actually in the arms of his rival!

From the moment when he was warned, he had walked with a bloody mist before his eyes. It did not obstruct his vision, however, so as to prevent him from seeing his bride throw up her arms in appeal, as she covered the body of her lover with her own.

Without a word, he fired straight at her heart; and as Flood sprang forward to catch her as she fell, the outraged husband winged a second messenger of death with so true an aim that the captain fell beside her.

The homicide then fled the scene of his dishonor and his bloody vengeance, and sought to drown memory in the maddest whirl of dissipation that a Western mining-camp can afford.

This was the story as Jim Carsdale told it.

Fancy Flo was only too ready to accept it exactly as stated.

"Jim," she cried, throwing her arms about him, "tie to me! You'll never have cause to regret it."

He gave her every assurance that he trusted her as he had never trusted another, and that nothing on earth could sever their relations.

There was a needless emphasis laid on this last, which, by its defiant air, betrayed the thought that was in his mind. If it proved that the apparition which had so shaken his nerves was indeed his wife in the flesh come to reclaim him he would repudiate her.

Fancy Flo read this plain enough; yet she dreamed the actual test, and sought to keep him with her.

She succeeded in this for some hours. But he drank incessantly and grew more and more restless, until by the time the gambling saloons were in full blast, he broke away to plunge into the mad excitement which alone seemed to blunt his sensibilities.

Knowing what she knew Fancy Flo was nearly beside herself. Could she go and perform her part in the drama that was to be enacted in the saloon of the Canvas City Hotel that night?

"But he has sworn that no bodily harm shall come to him," she said, referring to a pledge that Don Diablo had given her in holding her to her part in the execution of his scheme. "He only wants to keep them apart. And she deserves it. She has forfeited every right. What is it to me if that accursed Spaniard is equal with her in guilt? I have no call to punish them. Between them they are giving me what I want. In playing into his hands I shall be saving Jim from

her arts. Who knows but she might succeed in wheedling him into some sort of belief in her? She must be prepared with a plausible story or she would not have followed him, and the Don would not have thought it necessary to resort to such hazardous means of keeping them apart."

Fancy Flo did not acknowledge it to herself, but the fact was that her heart was at this point pierced with a dread that it might be possible to explain the ugly appearances away.

With this secret alarm making her heart beat so wildly as to almost suffocate her, she followed her lover to the dance-hall.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS PROUTER BLUFFS.

FOR an hour Californy Kit execrated his awkwardness.

"Mrs. Musgrave!" he muttered, holding gloomy self communion in the solitude of the crags, away among which he had wandered to get himself in hand once more after the tidal wave of emotion that had surprised him and swept away all his defenses. "Married! And I have told her everything in a glance! She's not fool enough not to know what that meant. Her face showed it. Ten to one, when I call, I'll get my walking-papers in not over-polite shape from that female dragon; and then I can go on a *pasear*—all on account of some coyote who has brought that look into her face!"

He clinched his fist and frowned. Just then he longed to redress the fancied wrongs of the enchantress on the bones of her supposed recreant husband.

Of course, he felt that he himself was just the person to show her that the blighted morning of her life might yet round into a bright and genial meridian.

He had half persuaded himself that the fellow must be an absconding banker, or something of that sort, since no one in his senses would voluntarily abandon so divine a creature, when it suddenly occurred to him:

"How do I know that she has a husband? She may be a widow!"

Instantly he clutched at the memory of her dress.

It was plain traveling gray, without a shred of black from the hem of her graceful draperies to the tip of the snowy dove's wing in her hat.

But then, a widow need not wear mourning forever. Young as she was, she might have had "her first" comfortably under ground long enough.

And just here Californy Kit had a bright idea. She had been divorced—divorced from a vagabond whom she now loathed!

That explained everything—her broken health and crushed spirits; for going through a divorce court is, to a woman of delicate sensibilities, like going through a thrashing machine!—and the rabid hostility of her companion toward anything in the shape of man. Above all it held out a hope to Mr. Californy Kit himself.

For the rest of that hour of waiting, he was constantly on the verge of snapping his fingers and whistling. But as the time for repairing to his interview with her drew near, the clouds of doubt gathered about him again.

He presented a very pale face at the Canvas City Hotel, and so cold an exterior that he looked fairly grim—as grim as Miss Prouter when she appeared on behalf of her charge.

"Mrs. Musgrave is indisposed, after the fatigue and excitement of the ride from Slabtown, and requests me to express her regrets at her inability to see you, and to thank you for your kind offices, and to say that she has since learned what she wished to ask you."

This much she said as if reading it out of a book. Then resuming her natural manner, she added:

"For myself I will say, that I ain't fergitful of a good turn from friend or foe; an' I bid you good-by with much kinder feelin's than I had fur ye last night, when I first sot eyes on ye."

She even went so far as to hold out her hand in amicable leave-taking.

Californy Kit understood this thoroughly. She was "shaking" him in a manner that could not be misunderstood.

He made a desperate effort to prevent the total severance of the slight tie that bound him to the enchantress, though he knew full well the utter futility of bowing down even to the dust before this implacable dragon.

"I beg, madam!" he said, with a deference which was altogether "too gauzy" to "close the eye" of the stony-faced lady to whom he appealed, "that you will say to Mrs. Musgrave"—the name almost choked him!—"that if I can serve her, or yourself, my dear madam, in any way, I will esteem the intrusting—"

"Excuse me!" interrupted Miss Prouter, in a voice like a barbed arrow. "I tried to make it plain to you, *sir*, at our first meetin', that Prudence Prouter didn't stand to have no man critur hand her in an' out o' no coaches nor things! We've managed to pull through so fur; an' I guess we'll do fur a spell longer, bein' jest as much obleeged to you, if you please!"

Californy Kit could only stammer apologies for the obtrusion of his services, and go off the field ingloriously, a whipped man.

He went away feeling savage. He had no show. He ground his teeth at the thought of having such an embassage come between him and the queen of his heart.

It was not in the hope of finding solace that he went into the hotel bar, where drinking and gambling and dancing were going on promiscuously, but only because even this was a little less unbearable than solitude with such thoughts as haunted him like malicious demons.

A gilt-edged bartender mixed him his favorite beverage; but it tasted flat. Then the belle of the dance hall made him the target of her blandishments; but he turned away in disgust. Everything palled upon him, and he was just on the point of carrying out a desperate resolve to remount his horse and dash back to Slabtown over a road made doubly dangerous by the darkness, when the outer door was thrown violently open, and into the saloon stalked a man with the air of one who had come to "paint the place red."

"Whoop!" yelled the intruder, sending a fusillade of bullets through the roof of the tent.

At first Kit thought of the Baby, who, as a matter of fact, was lying in a neighboring dog tent, with several patches of scalp neatly shaved and frescoed with strips of court-plaster, and with various parts of his anatomy adorned with bandages, peacefully sleeping off the effects of that red letter trip which had come so near being his final "round-up."

Turning, Kit recognized the man whom he had seen that evening carrying the street, with Fancy Flo on the withers of his horse.

He had voted him "an infernal fool" on sight, and there was no reason why he should have changed his opinion since.

Stranger as he was, Kit felt irritated by his braggadocio, as common as it was to see that sort of "cavortin' around" in the West. He was stirred by the impulse to pick a quarrel with him on the spot, which, of course, would be but the prelude to a demand for "pistols for two, and coffee for—the surgeon!"

But Jim Carsdale gave him a new idea.

"Whoop!" he yelled, again, "I'm the great original Poker Prince o' the Pr-r-r-rairie!—whoop! Kin you do anything for me this evening, gentlemen? Oh, I'm r-r-r-roamin' these hyar mountains fur to see whom I kin devour!—whoop-oo-ooop! Give me one sweet mortal fur to *chaw*!"

The less belligerent significance of this challenge was indicated by his flourishing above his head a handful of bank bills, from which he drew one without looking at its denomination, and slapped it down on the bar, saying:

"Johnny, that's to stop up the leaks in yer ratty ole roof! If thar's any change, give it to the boys in whisky. Whoop-oo-ooop! Whar air ye, my size?"

It was only too evident that Jim Carsdale had been "running a fair gauge in his irrigating sluice" recently; and Kit conceived the idea of securing diversion for himself and venting his irritation against the braggart, by "cleaning him out" at the one game in which that process can be performed with the greatest neatness and dispatch.

Kit held up one finger, and bowed, in acceptance of the challenge.

"My Christian friend!" cried Jim, "you're jest the long-legged rooster I've been lookin' for this month o' Sundays!"

And without more ceremony they placed themselves at a small round table, called for liquor, cigars, and several fresh packs of cards, and fell to.

Don Diablo just "failed to make connections," and had the pleasure of seeing Californy Kit all unconsciously occupy the place he had planned for himself.

"Perdition!" he growled, with a murderous frown. "Is this devil to balk me here? I'll see what can be done to shunt him off the track!"

He looked at Kit's breast, his eye attracted by the glitter of gold. He saw the ring he had presented with so bloodthirsty a proposal as to its use, defiantly suspended directly over the wearer's heart.

Involuntarily his hand went to his breast, where, in his preoccupation, he had failed to hang the locket.

"I'll look to that too!" he muttered, and strode from the room.

When he reappeared some time afterward, there was a look of grim satisfaction on his face.

"He followed her, did he?" he muttered. "Well, he'll not leave this camp in her company!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A STORM BREWING.

CALIFORNY KIT had "reckoned without his host." His first discovery was that, drunk or sober, Jim Carsdale was "no slouch" with the pasteboards.

On the other hand, he found it impossible to fix his own attention on the game.

When he should have been watching his opponent's face, and studying his method of play, he found his thoughts wandering off to the fair

face which his unguarded display of emotion had covered with confusion.

The result was, that his "pile" grew "small by degrees and beautifully less," while Jim's correspondingly increased.

Kit gave this fact not a thought. Not so the spectators who stood around with hands in pockets, many of them because they would otherwise have been empty, thanks to this same Jim Carsdale.

"H'm! Ketch on to that!" growled Old Saleratus, so named because his gaunt face rivaled in complexion the bilious-looking biscuit for which the far West is celebrated.

"Dog's luck!" grunted another.

"Ur slight!"

The effect of these two syllables was to cause a sudden hush to fall upon the crowd.

They might be construed as a tribute to legitimate skill, or as an insinuation of skill of another sort.

If any one had thought of this in connection with Jim Carsdale, no one had thus far had the hardihood to express his thought.

The "code" has one good effect. It bridles the tongue of slander. With the prospect of having "the amenities of a gentleman" thrust under their nose, most men think twice before saying anything offensive.

Don Diablo, who had re-entered the saloon—with, be it remembered, his sinister prediction as to Californy Kit's leaving the camp not in the company of the lady with whom he had entered it—noted with keen satisfaction the trend of public sentiment.

"The knaves are turning this accident to good account," he reflected, giving his men covert glances of approval.

Just then occurred an incident which bore fruits out of proportion with itself.

Jim Carsdale played with the reckless bravado of a crazy man.

Constantly drinking, he allowed his tongue to run on without intermission.

Now he chaffed his opponent for his want of success; now he fired a shot of badinage into the crowd promiscuously; now he boasted of his luck as the reward of his exemplary virtues, but to turn a moment later and execrate it as a thing which annoyed him by its monotony.

He managed to make it appear that he had "cleaned out" nearly every man in the camp—a fact which most successful gamblers are fain to keep in the background.

Meanwhile, the thoughts that he strove to keep at bay goaded him to incessant restlessness. He built the coins that he had won in neat piles, only to knock them over again by some unguarded movement of his hand.

Suddenly, in a burst of impatience, he caught up an unoffending pile, and cast the precious stuff out over the heads of the crowd, crying:

"Hang the filthy lucre! If I throw it away, I reckon it'll come back in some shape!"

At that, the crowd glowered blackly. Jim Carsdale had flown in the face of a gambler's superstition.

"A man as flouts his luck in that thar kind o' shape!" muttered Old Saleratus.

"A man as flouts his *luck* in that thar kind o' shape!" amended Lem Selberman.

A low, sullen growl from various parts of the crowd showed that his insinuation was understood, and that it began to be concurred in.

Those who were not in the "ring" did not know that these men were in the Don's pay for a purpose.

They were cleverly manufacturing public sentiment.

A gawky-looking tenderfoot, with eyes glistening, proceeded to scramble for the coins.

"Drop it, ye fool!" muttered Mustang. "Thar ain't no luck in them devil's ducats!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" chuckled Don Diablo, noting the success of his plot. "If the dolt were determined to play into my hand, he could adopt no course more certain of success. It wants only Fancy Flo to complete the game."

He looked toward the rear of the pavilion, where the dancers were.

Nowhere save in the Wild West is such an exhibition to be seen.

The liveliest men on the floor were the cowboys. Not a few of them wore the clumsy leathern leggings, frequently made of the skin of the mountain goat, with the wool lying in flossy waves, which effectually protect the legs of the rider from the thorns of the mesquit, but present about as graceful an appearance in the ballroom as if the wearer had incased his legs in well-stuffed bolsters.

However, the movements of the men were almost as awkward. They seemed one and all to have taken lessons from frisky calves and balking burros.

The steps all sprung from the inspiration of the moment and of the exhilarating beverage in vogue on the border. Arms and legs shot out at the more unexpected angles. Now and then some happy soul sought additional vent in an ear-splitting yell or the discharge of firearms.

In this scene of pandemoniac revel Fancy Flo whirled in mad abandon.

She was the queen of the rout beyond all rivalry. Between each dance she was so besieged that there was a constant menace of bloodshed

between the competitors for her favors, until she finally "stood them all off," and selected her own partners. Then the man who caught her inviting nod and smile was the target for general envy and disparagement.

To their uncritical observation she seemed the gayest of the gay; but Don Diablo read the hysteria in her glittering eyes and flushed cheeks, and in the unnatural wild cadence in her laughter.

He caught her eye, and shot a glance of warning into it.

Presently Californy Kit threw down an unsuccessful hand, saying:

"Pard, that does me. You hold over me for to-night."

And he pushed back his chair and rose.

"Better luck next time. I hope to see you again, sir," said Jim.

Then he shouted:

"Hi! Johnny! Catch!"

And he proceeded to flip several coins in rapid succession at the bartender, who caught them with the dexterity of a champion short-stop.

"Don't be barshful, gents!" he cried to the crowd, "but step up to the bar for yer reg'lar allowance."

"Whoop! who's the next lucky man to tackle the Ringtailed R-r-r-rooster o' the Rockies?"

"Senor, I like your boldness of play. If agreeable to you—"

"I reckon I kin accommodate you, sir, an' all yer wife's relations! Jump right in the swim without any ceremony!"

Californy Kit did not start. His nerves never betrayed his internal feelings; but he recognized the voice of the Spaniard, and from its coming directly over his shoulder knew that the Don stood near enough to touch him.

He turned round, with neither over-haste nor affected deliberation, and the two stood face to face, and within arm's-length.

Each shot a cold glance into the eye of the other, and each at the same instant dropped his eye to the breast of his foe.

The interchanged mementoes hung over their respective hearts, badges that had already attracted more than one curious glance.

Without recognition, the men passed each other, the Don to his game, and Californy Kit to leave the saloon.

Without appearing to do so, Don Diablo managed to turn and see the exit of his foe.

His eyelids fluttered and hid a look of satisfaction. Then he addressed himself to the business in hand as if it were the only thing in his thoughts.

Californy Kit had now no thought of carrying into effect his impulse to return to Slabtown. He thought he read a sinister purpose in Don Diablo's eye. Whether he was to have his reward nor not, he resolved to stay within reach, while there was a chance that the presence of the black-browed Spaniard was a menace to the lady who had gained such a mastery over his feelings.

The lights shining through the canvas illuminated the immediate vicinity of the hotel; but, leaving the camp in quest of solitude, Californy Kit had gone scarcely ten steps beyond the last tent, when suddenly the black darkness seemed to flash with a million darting meteors, and he stumbled and fell upon his face.

So it was of this that Don Diablo's dark look had been prophetic!

CHAPTER XV.

HIGH STAKES.

BEFORE the game between Don Diablo and Jim Carsdale was entered upon, Mustang raised a point of etiquette.

"Pard," he asked, "is this hyar the way a gent stands treat whar you've hung out 'long back?"

"What's the matter with it?" asked Jim promptly.

"Waal," replied Mustang, "I've seen swill pitched to hogs, an' seen 'em go fur it with both feet in the trough, an' no questions asked. But whar I got my raisin', when a gent invites his friends up to the bar, he most generally steps up hisself, an' sets 'em the example—jest to keep 'em in countenance, let's say."

The crusty old fellow thrust his hands into his pockets and walked off with the air of a man who had defined the law. If the other didn't choose to observe it, that was his own affair.

"Right you air, pard!" cried Jim with ready acquiescence. "But, gents, if in the exhilaration of the moment I have neglected any of the customary forms, you're none the less welcome to the stuff that smooths over the rough spots in life. I hope you will all join me in this testimonial of good-will."

"You, senor, especially," he added laughingly, to Don Diablo. "I want you to feel that I clean you out in the most amicable spirit."

They immediately adjourned to the bar, leaving their money lying loose and unguarded on the table.

The drinking was promiscuous, as the busy dispenser of tanglefoot could supply it to them. When a man had his three-fingers, he retired, giving his place to the next thirsty mortal. So there were men who coveted the money con-

stantly within reach of it. Many of them would have scrupled little to knock an acquaintance, if not a friend, in the head, for a quarter of the sum. Yet there it was as safe as in a bank vault.

The prospect of being strung up to the nearest tree, with no pettifoggish attorney or stupid jury to impede the execution of justice, proves a very wholesome restraint on acquisitiveness.

When he had taken his drink, Don Diablo walked away from the bar; but Jim Carsdale was detained by others who insisted on clinking glasses with him.

Don Diablo was button-holed by Old Salaratus, who, with the confidential air of one who did not like to see a stranger "done for," proceeded to give him a "pointer."

"I say, pard!"—touching him on the shoulder, and beckoning him mysteriously aside.

"What can I do for you, senor?"

"It's what I 'low fur to do fur you, ef you please."

"I am obliged to you. I attend you."

"Bein's as how's you're fresh in these hyar diggin's, an' can't be expected to know the run o' things nohow, I 'low to warn ye that ye're droppin' yer rocks into a sink-hole what's been prospected by old hands—with long heads aback o' 'em, ye understand—an' nary pay-dirt has thet same panned out."

"Do I understand you?" asked the Don, looking about on the crowd smilingly. "You have been losing money to the senor whose challenge I have accepted?"

"Waal, boss, ef we hain't, thar ain't no sich thing!"

"Judging from their looks, more than one has reason to sympathize with your sentiments."

"The scalawag has about cleaned up the camp, ef that counts fur anything with yer."

"Ah!" said Don Diablo, with a pleased look. "He must be the man I have been looking for."

"Eh, pard?" asked Old Salaratus, with a sudden intensity of interest. "Do I drop to yer? A U. S. detective?"

"Oh, no!" laughed the Don. "But when I play, I like to meet a man who knows how to handle the pasteboards, so as to make it interesting. A walk-over is always a bore."

"Oh!" said Old Salaratus, with the accent of marked disappointment.

And the heads that had been suddenly craned forward on all sides, were drawn back in a way that showed that others had shared Old Salaratus's misunderstanding and his disappointment.

"I may have the luck to avenge you," said the Don pleasantly, as he took his seat.

"Ole man," said Old Rummy, patting Old Salaratus confidentially on the shoulder, and bobbing his head wisely—they were old cronies, and had oft been full together—"thar ain't never nary dad-burned fool thing what ye can't git somebody to put his money up on."

In seeming disgust at the reception of his advice, Old Salaratus left the infatuated Spaniard to his fate.

So the game began, the whole crowd watching its progress sullenly.

The Spaniard played impassively, and in silence.

Jim Carsdale played as before, chaffing his opponent and the spectators, and moving about incessantly.

As before, success accompanied his seemingly reckless play. However good the Spaniard's hand, when there was anything considerable in the pot, his opponent seemed sure to hold a point or two over him.

Presently there came a crisis. The pot was raised alternately by the gamblers. Then the Don, with the air of a man who had resolved to "go his pile" on the issue, make or break, drew forth another wallet, and counted out its contents on the table.

"Hold on, pard," said Jim. "You propose to give me a show, I reckon?"

"I was told, between the acceptance of your challenge and the beginning of the game, that you had been cleaning out the camp. I thought I might get a chance at something respectable."

"Well, thar's a trifle of twenty thousand and odd. If you want the earth, I'll have to ask you to wait a minute."

"If you have any friends to call on, or any other resources of any kind, now's your chance," said Don Diablo. "I want to make a clean sweep of it, while I'm about it."

"You'll have the chance," replied Jim.

And rising, somewhat unsteadily by reason of the liquor with which he had plied himself, he looked about, and called out:

"Flo!"

The girl came, breaking from the dance. She was very pale, and her eyes burned with a fierce light of suppressed excitement.

She was saying to herself:

"What do we care for the money? It will bind him all the more securely to me."

"Just fork over that little odd change that I let you have. I'll double it for you in about thirty seconds."

Without a word she drew it from her bosom, and handed it to him.

Jim did not look at her; but he leered at the crowd, and said:

"That's the kind of a banker to have!"

Fancy Flo, pursuant of the part she was to play, hastened back to the dance.

"Stranger," said Jim, "you don't bite off a small hunk when you're hungry; but if that don't satisfy your maw, I own a couple of likely hosses, and some odd traps that might add a drop to the bucket."

"What do you value them at?" asked the Don, coolly.

"Oh, five hundred or so would be a fair price for 'em."

Don Diablo quietly "saw" the five hundred, and "called."

Jim, with a hiccup, threw down his hand.

It "showed up" four kings and a spot card.

A groan went up from the crowd.

But Old Salaratus, as if electrified, shouted:

"A hundred dollars it's aces! A hundred to fifty—to twenty-five! Fur the love o' God, gentlemen, hain't nobody got no sand?"

But nobody responded to his frantic appeal; and when Don Diablo faced his cards, showing four queens and an ace, it elicited nothing from the spectators but a gloomy shake of the head.

Then came a sudden and startling transformation scene.

"I hate to take yer money, stranger—'pon me soul I do!" exclaimed Jim, stretching out his hand to "scoop in" the stakes.

But at that instant, with a dexterous flirt of his foot, Don Diablo overturned the small round table between them, and his hand shot forth toward Jim Carsdale's abdomen.

With an oath, Mustang shouted:

"He's knifed him!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRAP SPRUNG.

BUT this was not true.

Instead, the Don had caught hold of the bottom of Jim's vest; and with a quick jerk which sent the buttons flying, he tore it open, and at the same instant brought his revolver in the other hand to bear on his opponent's face hissing in a fierce, tense voice:—

"Gently, senor! You have not all the sleight-of-hand on your side. I can handle the pistol as deftly as you can handle the pasteboards."

More than one eye saw two cards drop apparently from under Jim Carsdale's vest; and the Don instantly put his foot on them.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a voice as unmoved as if nothing unusual were happening, "I believe that there are enough fair-minded men here to see justice done. There is no occasion for excitement. This little matter can be arranged by a committee—whomever you wish to appoint; and I for one will stand by their decision."

Jim Carsdale looked stupidly at the revolver which menaced his life, and then at the Don's foot, which covered the cards.

"A fraud! a fraud!" shouted Larabee of Pike. "I knowed it, by thunder!"

"He had a couple o' keerds up his vest!" cried Mustang, in the same breath.

"I was fortunate enough to see them put there," said Don Diablo, coolly. "I wasn't putting up my money on four queens and an ace. That was *too* good."

In an instant Jim was seized and disarmed; and then the Don put up his weapon.

"Name your committee, gentlemen," he said. "The cards are awaiting them under my foot."

Then he addressed those immediately about him.

"If you gentlemen will stand back, I reckon some honest man will be found to gather up the rest of the pack, for comparison. And there is a trifle of money under your feet, the ownership of which is to be determined."

By this time Jim Carsdale had been sufficiently sobered by the shock to realize his position.

His first impression had been that he might really be guilty. He knew that he had been drunk. His brain had been a whirl of indefinite emotions, in which nothing had been distinct. *Could* he have put the cards there?

But then came the instinct of self-preservation. He knew the temper of the men who had him in charge. Detection in such wholesale swindling as they would believe had victimized half the men in the camp, would scarcely be requited by anything short of the rope.

"Hold on, gentlemen!" he cried. "ear I never put those cards there!"

"Of course not!" assented Old Salaratus, sarcastically. "They never does!"

"Bah!" scoffed Mustang, savagely.

A score of others attested their incredulity by fierce oaths.

"I reckon Larabee o' Pike an' Mustang is good enough men to pick up them keerds," suggested a man secretly in the Don's pay, as the crowd fell back to allow of the gathering up of the money and cards scattered on the floor by the overturning of the table.

The thing had been done so neatly that even those who were in the Don's pay, and expecting some trick the details of which they had not been told, were puzzled to determine whether Jim had really played into the Don's hand, or the thing was but a clever piece of sleight-of-hand.

In the most informal way it was conceded that

the stake of the supposed swindler was forfeit to his opponent.

"I am obliged to you, gentlemen," said the Spaniard. "I believe that this is a just decision. But I have no need for this money which has been won from you by fraud. I thought I detected him while he was playing with the gentleman who preceded me, and my purpose was to expose him. After we have disposed of him, you will appoint a committee into whose hands I will place the full amount of my winnings, to be distributed *pro rata*, as far as it will go, among those who have lost money to him in the past."

So generous a thing as this was wholly unlooked for. Every man there felt that if such luck had fallen to him, he would have "frozen to it."

It was not necessary for the Don's men to start the wild cheer which greeted him.

But in proportion as he became popular, the hatred against Jim intensified.

On all sides the air rung with denunciation.

By general consent hanging was the only fitting penalty for so outrageous an offense.

Within five minutes of the overturning of the table he was being hustled out of the tent on the way to the nearest tree.

All this had been done with such rapidity that there was no time for thought. Indeed, those who had been dancing had as yet no clear idea of what had happened. There was a great row, so that the dancing was discontinued; but whether some one had been killed, or a fight was yet going on, could not be made out.

The women for the most part either huddled together, pale and trembling, or tried to make their escape from the back of the tent, fearing the proverbial effect of stray shots.

But there was one who was forcing her way through the surging mob with the white desperation which only a woman can exhibit.

She did not make herself heard until they were out of doors, and indeed had reached the only too handy tree. But then she burst upon the scene like a fury.

"Stand back there! Unhand him, I say!" she cried, placing her back against the broad trunk of the tree, which protected her like a wall, and presenting a brace of derringers in the faces of Old Saleratus and Mustang, who held her lover in their vise-like grasp. "You know me! There'll be half a dozen dead men on this spot before this thing goes any further! Take your hands off of him, Mustang—and you, you old ratter! I'll answer for him before a regularly organized court!"

At such a white heat was this fierce demand made, that the men, as if involuntarily, let go of the captive, and stepped out of range of her weapons.

"Give me one of those weapons, and I'll meet the crowd!" cried Jim Carsdale, leaping toward the woman who had rescued him.

But Don Diablo interposed, seizing him by the wrist, and hurling him back.

The movement was so lightning-like, so unerring, that every one who saw it realized that they had no common man before them.

"Hold!" he said, without raising his voice with excitement. "We'll have none of that."

"Madam, I will see that justice is done here."

"Who are you? What is the meaning of this?" demanded Fancy Flo.

"It has been my privilege to put an end to the frauds with which this fellow has been victimizing this camp, by effecting an exposure."

Fancy Flo looked at her lover with unaffected anguish in her face. How could she have the strength to go on with this plot? Was it not worse than all else, to bring this humiliation—so wholly undeserved—upon him?

But, looking into the faces of the crowd, she reflected that the thing was now beyond her power to correct. Who would believe her if she were to reveal the truth?

"It isn't true, Flo!—on my soul, it isn't true!" declared Jim, earnestly.

"I believe you!" she cried, springing toward him and throwing her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Jim!—I do—I do believe you!" This was not in the programme, as it had been marked out for her; but Don Diablo did not regret that her feelings had carried her somewhat out of her part.

Hangman's Oak, as the tree beneath which they stood was called, grew out of a little knoll, so that from where he stood he could see, over the heads of the intervening crowd, any one who stood in the doorway of the hotel; and, for the same reason, any one standing in the doorway could distinctly make out the central figures in the fearful drama that was being enacted.

In that doorway he saw a woman with wild, distended eyes, bloodless lips and clinched hands, staring breathlessly, as if under a paralyzing fascination, at the man whose life was menaced by that surging, howling mob, and at the woman who had thrown herself into his arms after having rescued him temporarily from his foes.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE OUTCASTS OF CANVAS CITY.

ON seeing her husband riding through the camp with another woman in his arms, Mrs.

Musgrave had been shocked into speechlessness and helplessness. She did not faint. She only hung in the supporting arms of her sturdy companion and protector, limp and trembling.

Refusing all assistance, Miss Prouter had half-led, half-dragged her to the apartment assigned to them, and laid her on the bed.

The stricken woman had turned upon her face, and refused to move from that position.

Of all things that she had been prepared for, the thought of finding a rival had never entered her mind. But the situation was unmistakable, and in the hours of agonized humiliation that followed, all her real love and respect for the man with whom before the altar she had exchanged vows of mutual love and loyalty and honor, died a miserable death.

Still, she reflected that he was her husband, and that she had driven him to desperation by an act, not of guilt, but of folly, which had fastened upon her the appearance of guilt; and she believed it her duty to try to bring him back to her side, and then to make the best of two blighted lives, by mutual forgiveness and forbearance.

As she lay thus, revolving the bitterest thoughts of her life, the canvas partitions enabled her to hear Jim Carsdale's ride with Fancy Flo discussed, so that she could not help identifying the parties; and she learned one phase of her husband's life in the camp, presented so that every word was a cruel stab.

Still she had not moved, nor answered a word to her companion's appeals to her to rouse herself and partake of food, until she heard her husband's voice raised in his gasconading challenge of the crowd to meet him at poker.

Then she started up and gazed about wildly, only to fall back to her former position with a sob and a shudder.

But when, amid the furious uproar, she heard his voice raised in protestation of his innocence, she sprung up like a mad woman, and rushed from the apartment, in spite of Miss Prouter's efforts to restrain her.

"What's the row, Tom?" she heard a rough-voiced fellow ask.

"They've ketched Jim Carsdale at last. He won't come no more skin games this side o' Kingdom Come, ur I lose my guess!"

"What was it, Tom?"

"Too many keards up his sleeve—by accident, ye know. Haw! haw! haw!"

"He'll swing?"

"You bet! What's that thar rope? Thar never was a louder call fur it."

She heard no more. Madly she tore by these men, who were so intent upon their murderous business that they did not pause to look at her.

But when, from the threshold she beheld that surging mob, she was struck with dismayed helplessness.

What could she do among such wild beasts? How could she find her way to him? Where was he?

Miss Prouter overtook her, put her arms about her, and tried to draw her back into the tent. But she stood like a rock, resisting this persuasion without being conscious of it.

Then the flare of quickly-lighted torches, and lanterns, the bearers of which forced themselves through the crowd, holding them above their heads, showed her a scene that froze the blood in her heart.

Her rival's Amazonian championship of the doomed man, and her casting herself—a very woman—on his neck!

The wife staggered forward, beating the air with her hands, uttering a choking cry, and would have fallen to the ground but that Miss Prouter's arms supported her.

That efficient guardian then proved her metal, lifting her charge bodily in her arms, and carrying her, unconscious, back into the hotel.

Out there under Hangman's Oak, the tragic scene proceeded without interruption.

"Gentlemen!" cried Don Diablo, intimating by gesture, his voice being drowned, that he wished to address them.

"Order! Order!" yelled voices on every side.

"Gentlemen!" repeated the Don, when he could be heard. "It is I who exposed this fraud."

"Yes! yes!"

"Then don't you think that I ought to have something to say with regard to the punishment of the criminal?"

"Ay! ay!"

"Give the gent a show!"

There were a plenty of his men, already instructed, to give the proper direction to popular sentiment.

"Then I say that there is no call for the rope in this case."

At this a howl of furious disapproval went up.

"No! no!—no let up!"

"Put him through a course o' sprouts!"

"This h'ar ain't no common case. He's swabbed up the hull camp!"

"Choke the wind out o' the snoozer!"

The Don's own men were the loudest in this implacable vindictiveness.

However, he lifted his hand calmly.

"Gentlemen," he said, in the firm, even tones of one who was so used to having his will prevail that he never stopped to consider the amount or kind of opposition, "the unwritten law of the

mines must be considered, if we would draw the line between the execution of justice and the commission of murder. There is no evidence against this man save for cheating at cards. Suppose he had cheated only one man?"

"He'd git run out o' camp hotfoot!" said Larabee of Pike.

"Exactly," said the Don. "The principle then, is the same—one man or many. It is only a question as to how soon he is detected. I say, therefore, that banishment is what he deserves, and banishment is all that I will ever consent to the infliction of. Remember that it is not as if a horse were stolen behind a man's back. When any one undertakes to play poker, it is his business to guard against imposition."

There was no ready acquiescence to this view; but first one and then another of the Don's men came over to his side, as had been planned; and this carried those of the outsiders who would have stood out for the severer penalty.

But now Jim Carsdale himself interposed.

"Hold on, gentlemen!" he cried. "You might as well kill me as put this disgrace upon me! I never wronged a man of you. If I have beaten you, it is because I played a better game. I've gambled all my life, and with sharper men than I have found in this camp. You lost your money to me when you might have done better."

But a concentrated howl of rage interrupted him, as if he had added insult at this critical moment, by disparaging their skill.

As a fact, he had spoken the literal truth. They deliberately lost their money to him—that is to say, the money with which the Don had supplied them for that purpose.

But they of whom this was true were the loudest in their denunciations, and the most savage in their manifestation of a disposition to get at him and tear him limb from limb.

Again the Don interposed.

"Come, come, gentlemen! this won't do. You can't a hundred men pitch onto one."

This patronage, which he believed to be insincere, goaded Jim to desperation.

"I tell you I am an innocent man!" he cried. "Let the question be decided between my accuser and myself. I will fight him at ten paces, or in any way he chooses. Then if any of the rest of you are unsatisfied, I will fight the lot of you, one at a time, as long as I have an inch of skin unperforated!"

Don Diablo turned upon him with a look of smiling contempt.

"That would be a privilege that few men would not gladly accept," he said. "But do you fancy that a gentleman would demean himself by fighting such a knave as you—a detected cheat? Out upon you! I will receive you as I would any other ruffian—a midnight assassin or garroter—if we ever meet in the future. But to meet you on the field of honor would be to forfeit the right to associate with gentlemen, the world over."

"Was thar ever sich cheek!" howled Larabee to Pike. "The scallawag ought to be kicked all around the camp!"

"I speak fur the fust kick!" cried Mustang.

This idea promised to be popular; but again Don Diablo stood firm for dignified proceeding.

"The fellow has richly earned a disgraceful banishment from the camp," he said. "Having got back so much of his plunder that no one will be greatly a sufferer, let us content ourselves with what every honest man in the mountains, or in the world for that matter, would approve."

"His horses, and whatever else he may have included among his personal effects, I cheerfully give up to him. Let him pack his traps, and get out of the camp without a moment's delay."

After such generosity as this, the men—those who were honestly losers through Jim Carsdale—could not stand for the little that they might be out over and above what would be restored to them.

The victim of this subtle plot was in despair. Like the *retarius* of the Roman arena, who entangled his adversary in a net, Don Diablo had so wound his enemy in the toils that he could move neither hand or foot.

Jim Carsdale hung his head in helpless misery. But one there was who stood by him. Fancy Flo wound her beautiful arms about his neck, and kissed him before them all.

"Jim," she sobbed, with the tears of remorse rolling thick and fast down her cheeks, "from this hour, for all eternity, we are one, in honor or in shame, in life or in death! I will go with you, the happiest woman in the world, to share your fortunes and to be ever at your side."

"No!" he said, endeavoring, not ungently, to put her away. "Where I go you cannot follow me! I shall live like the wolf—like the tiger in its native jungle!—hiding from the hatred of all men, and thirsting only for the life-blood of my enemy! Does this cunning fiend fancy that he can thrust me into infamy, and then escape a reckoning with his balderdash about the field of honor? No! man and woman, both have struck their poison fangs into my heart. I will eschew the whole accursed race!"

"But you shall not cast me off!" cried the girl. "I will follow you whether you will or

no! Oh, Jim! didn't you say that you would never doubt me?"

But her own words pierced her heart when she had spoken them, remembering how she herself was a consenting party to his infamy. And with a great cry of remorse she buried her face in his breast, clinging to him desperately.

He mistook the true cause of her emotion, and was touched by it; and lifting her face, said:

"I'll take you at your word. You are the only human being that was ever true to me. Come! we will go together."

They went to her tent, accompanied by the mob. Everything was packed and slung on poles between two of Jim's horses; and, with the mob at their heels, they took up their march into exile.

CHAPTER XVIII.

KIT STEALS A MARCH ON THE DON.

It will be remembered that, in his agitation, Californy Kit left the camp in quest of solitude; and that he was scarcely beyond the range of illumination through the canvas walls of the various places of amusement, when he "saw stars" and "went to grass."

He was not stunned outright; but his wits were so scattered that, for the one precious instant that was allowed him, he was not sufficiently himself to cry out for help.

He had hardly touched the ground, when a heavy body fell upon him, and a bear-like hug pinioned his arms to his sides.

"The blanket! the blanket, curse ye! Air ye goin' to leave him a show fur to wind his yawp?" he heard a hoarse voice, which sounded dreamy and far away, demand.

"Hyar ye air!" replied another.

And his head was enveloped in the heavy folds of a blanket which effectually cut off all chance for an outcry that could be heard.

By this time the shock of realizing his situation counteracted the force of the stunning blow he had received. He thought of being a victim to the treachery of a cowardly Greaser, who dared not meet him openly, face to face, but might wreak any vile revenge when he had him helpless in his power; and struggled madly for freedom.

But other assailants cast themselves upon him, until he could move neither hand nor foot, their purpose evidently being to hold him down until the blanket had suffocated him into unconsciousness.

"Will I belt him wan over the head?" asked one of the men.

"No, you won't!" was the crabbed reply. "You 'tend to yer orders, an' hold yer jaw. We've got him dead to rights; an' the easiest way is the best."

Realizing the fruitlessness of the struggle, Kit desisted, hoping that he might thus secure a release before they had actually murdered him.

But his device was clearly seen through.

"He's playin' possum, now," said the ruffian in command. "Waal, he'll find that he's got an old coon to deal with in that thar leetle game."

Was he then to die this dog's death? Could he lie still and sink into unconsciousness, and so drift to death?

The mad instinct of self-preservation—the fierce fight of the body with which the mind has nothing to do—broke the leash of his iron will; and he struggled again, like a Titan.

"Hang on to him! Keep him down!" hoarsely whispered the chief assailant. "This is the last of it. Thirty seconds will finish him!"

Then for a short space there was only the sound of struggling bodies, and the hoarse breathing of men straining their powers to the utmost.

The intensity of the commotion fell off gradually, until all was still.

"Good-by, John!" said the garroter, with satisfaction. "He was a tough one."

"Shall I let up on him, Sam?"

"Yes. Take the thing off his head."

"He's fixed?"

"You bet!"

"What next?"

"Git!"

The blanket was spread out on the ground; the limp body was placed upon it; and with a man at each corner, the burden was lifted and borne away in the darkness.

When Californy Kit recovered consciousness, he found himself lying on the ground, with a strong taste of liquor in his mouth.

"Waal, Cap, ye'r comin' back to this hyar place o' trial an' tribulation?" said a gruff voice.

"Ef I'd 'a' been so fur on the way, blow me ef I'd 'a' backed out, fur all thar is to git on this side. But, then, every man knows his own business best. Thar's some as can't stan' a warm reception, nohow."

Kit sat up. About him were the pine-draped crags. Overhead was a black canopy of hurrying clouds, with here and there a star peeping through.

In his immediate vicinity he could dimly make out the figures of three masked men, seated on bowlers.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

"Waal, Cap, ye see, it's a leetle—jest a leetle

bit crowded in Canvas City. No good don't come o' havin' too many cocks-o'-the-walk to the squar' inch, in no community. Hence, whence, an' whar'fore, you air respectfully requested to git, yamose, absquatulate! Understand?"

"I understand," replied Kit, "that if you are not the cowards you appear to be, and will place before me one and all of the miserable coyotes who have had a hand in this, I will undertake to give them all satisfaction in whatever shape suits them."

"Waal," drawled the outlaw, listlessly throwing one leg over the other, "thar's somethin' in that. But every man understands his own game, an' we ain't callin' no sich hand as that."

"What have you brought me hyar for?"

"To p'int ye the highest road to almost any place you think you'd like to go."

"Well, I think I'd like to go back to Canvas City."

"Ugh—ugh, boss! That thar leetle burgh ain't down on the map."

"Who is the instigator of this outrage?"

"Waal, blow me ef I rightly know. It seems to be jest the prevailin' sentiment. The solid men o' Canvas City has come to the conclusion that ef we had fewer card sharps, the leetle show o' color what we manage to scrape together would go further round."

"To git right down to bottom facts, the boys don't like the way you tackled Jim Carsdale. It was a leetle too promisin'."

"Now, we've brung your hoss out hyar, an' all you've got to do is to straddle the critter, an' git. Hyar's the four p'int's o' the compass, which the same ye kin take yer pick."

"We're hopin' fur to see ye ag'in under more favorable circumstances."

His weapons were restored to him, and he was led to where his horse awaited him in the mountain road.

"You shall see me again, under circumstances more favorable to myself," said Kit. "Meanwhile, please to remember that the first trick doesn't decide the game."

"Boss, when ye return, fetch an army with ye, an' look out fur stray shots."

"Thank you! Your suggestion is unnecessary."

"So long!"

Californy Kit rode away in the direction of Slabtown, revolving in his mind a scheme to circumvent Don Diablo.

That he had that gentleman to thank for his uncomfortable predicament, he never for a moment doubted.

"I am in his way, or he would not take the trouble to put me out of it," he reflected.

"Why?"

A ready explanation was not long in presenting itself.

"Mrs. Musgrave! There can be no other reason. I am a total stranger to him. He knows that I have followed her to block his game."

"Well, we'll see who takes the next trick!"

And putting spurs to his horse, he dashed forward.

Full a mile from the point where his captors had set him free, a man stepped out in the road after he had passed, and looked after him.

"H'm! that means business!" he mused.

When the sound of Kit's horse's hoofs had died out in the distance, he led forth an animal from the undergrowth, mounted, and rode back, to rejoin his companions in crime.

"Waal?" was the demand, as he pulled up among them.

"We hain't seen the last o' Californy Kit!—you hyear me?" He's the always on hand man an' don't ye forget it!"

"That ain't none of our funeral," said the chief of the band. "We've obeyed orders, ef we broke owners. That lets us out clean."

"What fur do you 'low he's comin' fur us ag'in?" asked another of the men.

"He's in sich a hurry to git to Slabtown. Reckon he'll fetch that army you hinted at, boss."

"He'll have use fur it!" replied the chief, laconically.

In a body they rode toward Canvas City.

But just before reaching the camp they separated, and made their way in one at a time, with every precaution to escape observation.

Meanwhile Californy Kit was preparing to steal a march on his foes, counting upon turning their flank before they threw out pickets to intercept him.

"An army!" he said to himself. "I'll show them that I'm an army in myself!"

When he had got perhaps two miles from the spot where he had been released, he rode into the covert beside the way, dismounted, and tied his horse, secure from passing observation.

Abandoning the spot on foot, he toiled for an hour or more among the crags, where a single false step in the darkness might dash him to a death of horrible mutilation, or leave him with broken limbs to starve in miserable deolation.

So by a circuitous route he reached and entered Canvas City, without challenge.

He found it in a state of great commotion. Blood-red torches, flaring on every hand, threw their lurid illumination over a scene which it would be difficult to match outside of Tartarus.

The mob was surging along the one street of

the camp, hooting, howling, laughing, whistling, discharging firearms, and beating on tin cans, escorting the exiles out of camp in ignominy.

The great mass were content to follow in the wake of the outcasts; but on either side the most obstreperous pressed ahead, and openly scoffed in their victims' faces.

Fancy Flo was mounted; Jim was on foot.

He walked with locked lips, with his head hanging on his breast, yet flashing dark looks out from under knit brows, from side to side, with the air of a man trying to fix his persecutor in his mind, while he bided his time against a future requital.

Fancy Flo was a woman, so that her resentment was more intense, if not so deep as Jim's. She could not restrain her tongue.

"You cowards!" she cried, flashing her glorious eyes upon men who had hitherto hung upon her slightest smile, but who, jealous of her adherence to a man whom they hated, forgot all their boasted gallantry, and jeered her brutally. "A thimbleful of Jim Carsdale's generous blood has more of true courage and manhood in it than all the whisky-tailings in your vile bodies!"

But her indignant voice was drowned by the hubbub of the charivari.

In one part of the crowd some one had struck up the always popular melody of "John Brown," and the random belaboring of tin cans had resolved itself into a somewhat measured beat. Improving on this hint, a rival faction sought to force the more appropriate "Rogue's March" upon general acceptance. Between them, pandemonium reigned.

Californy Kit had not far to go for an explanation of this scene. He had seen "card-sharps" "fired out" before. "The grand bounce" might arise from detected fraud or from general unpopularity.

What Kit's observant eye marked at once was the fact that Don Diablo was the leading spirit in this summary execution of public disapprobation.

"If he is really plotting against Mrs. Musgrave," reflected Kit, "he would not turn aside from his purpose to meddle with a man who had no bearing upon the case. What, then, are Jim Carsdale's relations with Mrs. Musgrave, to make it necessary to get him out of the way?"

It was natural that Kit should fall into the mistake of supposing that the Don was only clearing the field, as in the case of his own expulsion.

Fearing to attract the attention of any one to himself, since he had no means of judging who might and who might not be in the Don's interests, Kit could not get a clear statement of the situation, but had to trust to his native powers of observation and inference.

Having seen the outcasts well beyond the camp, and watched them till they disappeared in the darkness, the mob sped them on their way with a final yell of derision, and a parting salute of firearms, and then returned noisily to the scene of their revels.

"Ha, ha!" chuckled Don Diabolo. "Everything is working like a charm. My lady has met with a delightful reception at the end of her two-thousand-mile journey in quest of a truant husband. I fancy that the stock she took in Mr. Horace Musgrave is somewhat below par at the latest quotations."

"And her new conquest! Curse her! she was never at a loss for them."

And with this bitter interruption of his jubilation he ground his teeth in jealous rage.

"I may have to take care of the gallant Californy Kit even more effectually, before I get through with him. On reflection, I may conclude to drive my stiletto into his back, instead of through the ring which he flaunts so ostentatiously."

At this point Kit, keeping himself well out of sight, saw the Don joined by a man whom he recognized by his general appearance, in spite of the disguise which he had previously worn, as the chief of his assailants.

On receiving the report of his tool, the Don shrugged his shoulders.

"He cannot get back before morning, if by that time," he said. "We'll be ready for him."

He then gave minute orders to the ruffian who had served him so faithfully, and, having left the money which he had won from Jim Carsdale with a committee who were to distribute it according to their discretion, after making an examination into the claims of those who had suffered from his supposed frauds, he mounted his horse, and rode away toward Slabtown.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SUSPECTED STRANGER.

THIS move of the Don's was puzzling to Californy Kit. Why, having cleared the field, did he apparently abandon it?

"It is only in appearance," said our hero to himself. "He'll be back again in his own time. Well, he'll find me on deck, come when he may. If only I was not working so in the dark!"

It will be remembered that the Canvas City Hotel was a large square tent. A passage ran

down the center, directly under the ridgepole, with little boxes of rooms, partitioned off with canvas, on either side. At the end of this passage was the dining-room, which took up the whole width of the tent, and back of that the kitchen.

Mrs. Musgrave and her attendant had the two rooms nearest the dining-room on the same side of the passage.

Learning this, Californy Kit secured the berth next the dining-room, opposite.

"I will be within sound of her voice," he said to himself. "If he seeks an interview with her—and has better luck than I in being admitted to her presence!—it will probably be held in the dining-room, as there is no other place with any pretense to privacy.

"It isn't just the thing to play eavesdropper!" he went on, making a wry face; "but I'll have to let the fact that my motive is an honest one atone for that. She may need prompt interference.

"She shall have it, if called for!" he added, with a determined flash of the eye.

He drew his bowie, and balanced it in his hand, surveying the canvas wall with his eye.

"A six-foot slash will let me through that in time to catch my subtle Spaniard in the very act which elicits the slightest cry of alarm from her."

He slept that night fully dressed, and with his revolver where he would have only to close his hand upon it to be ready for instant action.

Nothing occurred.

In the morning, the sound of Miss Preuter's voice assured him that all was right with the woman over whom he had mounted guard.

Mrs. Musgrave was so prostrated by the shock she had sustained, that she seemed incapable of forming any plan of action, and so remained for the time being in a helpless state of indecision.

It was near midday when a horseman dashed into Canvas City from the direction of You Bet.

He at once attracted general attention.

His dress was entirely different from the rough and ready ease of the Western style; and yet, in its way, it was careless too.

It was the dress of a gentleman in a Southern city.

The brim of his slouch hat had a graceful curve. His neckcloth had the negligent knot of an artist. His clothes were loose, and yet shapely. He was booted like one used to riding to hounds.

Through the window—it will be remembered that the hotel had a slab front—Californy Kit saw this man ride up and swing from the saddle.

Was it something in the movement of his body, in the expression of his face, in the flash of his eye, that made our hero start and look him over a second time with piercing scrutiny?

He certainly did not recognize him as any one he had met before; and he was good at remembering faces.

Still there was a something that made him feel uneasy.

"That man is going to cross my path in some way," he said to himself. "It will perhaps be as well not to let him see me until I have a chance to size him up.

"I'll wait, though, to hear his voice."

Getting out of the stranger's line of vision through the window, Californy Kit made an interesting discovery.

One of the men who were lounging before the hotel started toward the stranger with a quick, covert sign.

"Ah!" ejaculated Kit. "That scoundrel has an understanding with him! I was right. He wishes to warn him that I didn't stay put."

The man was Bill Sligo. Kit thought that he recognized in him the chief of the garroters who had laid him by the heels the night before.

At the risk of being discovered, Kit stepped back in a line with the window, to see how the stranger received this overture.

There was not a trace of recognition in his face as he let his glance take in all of the loungers along with Sligo, saying:

"Does any one of you gentlemen happen to be the proprietor of this house?"

"This hyar's the rooster what always turns up when that thar jack's called, stranger," replied a sturdy fellow, who was cutting some plug tobacco and rolling it in his palm preparatory to filling his pipe.

"Ah! I am glad to meet you, sir. Can I see you a moment within the house?"

"You jest bet you kin! you or any other man, on any business what yer pleased to nominate."

"Thank you, I will detain you but a moment."

The stranger entered the house with the easy swing of a Southerner, leaving the landlord to follow him.

Big Dave, behind his back, turned his head so as to look over his shoulder at the companions he left, and thrust his tongue into his cheek with a wink and a grin.

To the true Westerner anything approaching elegance in dress is effeminate, and therefore to be gayed.

Meanwhile Californy Kit, with a gliding motion, had gained the seclusion of his own room without being seen.

"What is it in his voice?" he asked himself. "I've heard it before, as sure as a gun! But where, when, under what circumstances? It's a voice that I don't like! It's like the man himself. I don't like him! But why?"

"How strange! How can I have forgotten any one whom I have reason to hate? I do hate him!"

Kit cudged his brain with not a little impatience, yet without result. The memory eluded him completely.

"Meanwhile," he reflected, "I'll lay for his 'business'!"

Keeping perfectly still, he listened intently.

"Waal, sir!—hyar ye air," said Big Dave, squaring before his guest.

"Ah! This appears to be a—a—sort of office," said the stranger, hesitatingly, looking about him.

All that suggested the office of a hotel was a rude pine table, consisting of two pine boards with one end nailed against the wall and the other supported by a single leg, on which lay a dog-eared account-book, used as a register, with a little stone bottle of ink and a pen. Behind this table a lemon-box, with one end and the slats of one side knocked away, and the remaining slats rounded by being nailed to a barrel-hoop, supplied the place of an office chair.

"The bar?"

He indicated the unfinished part of his question by looking about for that never-failing appendage.

"This way, sir," said Big Dave, with a wave of his hand toward a doorway leading into the other of the two tents which united to form his establishment.

He immediately conceived a higher opinion of the dapper stranger. Evidently he "knew what was what."

When they returned a few minutes later, Big Dave was smiling blandly, and saying:

"Waal, yes; I 'low to keep about as white an article as the line o' trade calls fur. Mostly, in these hyar parts, the boys wants somethin' as'll go through 'em like a cactus, scrapin' all the way down. Put it to 'em strong, says they, an' no fault found."

The stranger laughed pleasantly.

"That seems to be characteristic of them in more respects than one," he said. "And now, sir," with that slight change of voice which indicates a return to business, "if you will just say to the lady, with my compliments, that I should be glad to see her, I shall be still further obliged to you."

"Yours to command!" said Big Dave, with an affectation of suavity which would have been awkward in a politely disposed buffalo calf.

But he was swearing within himself that he would "take any galoot from the States, side-holt ur back-holt, ur ary holt as he was pleased to nominate, an' not let him lay over Big Dave Magruder fur purty, nohow!"

He then "waltzed"—to use his own favorite expression—down the passage to Mrs. Musgrave's door.

Be it understood that the doors in this model hotel closed with a flap, like a tent. But there were posts at the corners of the rooms, to which the canvas walls were tacked; and against one of these Big Dave rapped with the flat of his hand, cleared his throat, and said:

"Ef so be the lady in No. 17 is in."

"What is wanted?" asked the sweet voice of the occupant, making Californy Kit's heart leap, and throwing Big Dave into almost hopeless confusion.

The perspiration started on his forehead, and the palms of his hands became clammy. He wrung them as if washing them in invisible water, and stood bowing at the flap of the door, chewing his immense quid like lightning, and twisting his face into all sorts of embarrassed expressions.

He managed to say:

"Ef you please marm?"

And there he came to a dead halt, "a total wreck."

"Yes," said the lady. "Do you wish to see me?"

"Hem! That is to say! You strike me whar I live, marm! Ahem!—jist ary time when ye ain't tuck up with a better man. But jest at the present writin', marm, it is to say as a gent—a gent, ye understand, o' the first water—one as I kin recommend. It's waitin' yer pleasure, marm; yes, marm, yer good pleasure!"

And here, once more, completely demoralized, so that he did not himself know what he had said or left unsaid, he came to a full stop.

"Do I understand you?" asked the lady, in a doubtful voice.

"Waal, marm, it's hopin' as how you do," replied Dave. "But ef so be yer humble sarvant hain't got the thing by head's an' tails, maybe the gent hisself kin straighten it out to yer likin'."

"A gentleman to see me?" cried the lady, with a startled cadence in her voice.

"That's jest the size of it, marm; an' much obleeged to you in the bargain."

There was a momentary pause of dead silence; then the lady asked rather tremulously:

"What sort of a gentleman?"

"Waal, marm, that's as may be," replied Big Dave, diplomatically. "Some likes 'em one style, an' some wicy wersy. But, Lein's as how yer humble sarvant don't 'low to travel on his good looks, an' hain't no sleight a-sizin' up—"

"His general appearance, I mean. It is not—not—"

But her voice broke. The words which would have made known her fear that it was the Spaniard, died on her lips.

"Waal, marm, he's a white man. I'll go my pile on that!"

"A white man!" echoed Mrs. Musgrave, mistaking Dave's slang for an assurance that her visitor was not a black man.

"You will allow that, ef so be you'll only see him, marm," urged Dave, pressing his client's cause warmly.

"He gave you his name?"

The fact that this customary form had been overlooked did not trouble the tender conscience of the burly landlord. In that visit to the bar, the stranger had acquitted himself so cleverly that Dave had "cottoned" to him, and was "bound to see him through."

"Waal, marm, now you speak about it, I do 'low as the gent says—let me see—blow me ef I hain't clean furgit! Thomson—Johnson? No, 'twan't none o' them! I hain't hyeared none high-toneder than—waal, I swar!"

"Where is Miss Preuter?" asked the lady.

"Pon me soul, that I don't know!" declared Big Dave, as if relieved that he could state something roundly. "But we'll shake her up in—"

"Don't trouble yourself, thank you."

"Jest as you say, marm."

There was another pause of indecision, which Big Dave broke with:

"You kin see the gent, ef so be you'll be pleased to, in the office—which the same it is a mite conspicuous; or, ef it's more to yer notion, the dinin'-room's at yer service."

"Let it be the dining-room," said Mrs. Musgrave, coming to a sudden decision. "I will be out in a moment."

Like a clever diplomat, now that he had carried his point Big Dave swung over to the other side, to show his entire disinterestedness in the matter.

"Ye hain't no call fer to see him, ef so be you'd rather not," he assured her. "Fire him out, says you; an' out he goes, says I."

"Thank you. I will see the gentleman."

"Marm, we air yours to command!"

And going for Mrs. Musgrave's visitor, he ushered him into the dining-room with great parade.

The stranger bowed in silence.

Was it that he did not wish the lady to hear his voice, and so be apprised of his identity beforehand?

Californy Kit asked himself this question; and decided that, so far, it had a bad look.

With his revolver in one hand and his bowie in the other, he stood waiting, ready for any emergency.

CHAPTER XX.

A HOT INTERVIEW.

WITH a step so light that Californy Kit scarcely detected it, Mrs. Musgrave came from her room and glided into the dining-room.

She stopped just far enough within the flap of the entrance to allow it to drop behind her.

Then she took a step in retreat, lifting her hand to her heart, with a startled gasp.

She turned as pale as death, and with her eyes fixed upon her guest with a mingled stare of terror and loathing, groped behind her with her hand for something to take hold of for support.

The intruder, who had been awaiting her appearance with his eyes fixed upon the entrance, bent upon her a gaze of fiery passion.

Yet it was as if the sentiment overmastered him, bursting through the restraint of deprecation he sought to put upon himself.

"Madeline," he said, in low, deep, vibrant tones, "I am here!"

The woman straightened herself, with a sudden surge of imperious indignation.

"How dare you address me?" she demanded.

"How dare you force yourself into my presence?"

"I dare do anything for your sake," he pleaded, humbly.

"For my sake? You coward! You traitor! You liar! You—you—I have no name for so vile a wretch!"

The woman did not speak loud, so that her voice could be heard sufficiently to attract attention. Instead, it was husky with intense scorn.

"I deserve all this, and perhaps more," said the man, in the same low, submissive tones. "I plead but one excuse. You have known it from the first. I love you!"

"Love! If I had the power to annihilate you! You have wrecked my life! You have overwhelmed me with degradation so—"

"I have come to save you from degradation. Will you listen to me? If you had heeded when I pleaded with you before, all this might have been spared us both."

The lady could not reply. A fit of coughing, brought on by her choking emotions, forced hot tears from her eyes.

"From the moment I could rise from my bed, I have followed you," pursued the man, his voice becoming stronger and firmer. "I will not disguise my purpose. It was to kill him as I told you I would have done before, if circumstances had not prevented."

"Captain Flood," burst in the woman, "murder will not add to your record of infamy!"

He waved his hand, as if to put this slur aside.

"I have seen him," he went on. "He came into a neighboring camp last night, in company with a woman with whom you surely cannot consent to enter into competition. I learned all that has occurred here, and have no longer any desire to relieve him of the burden of life. You know that my one aim has exclusive reference to yourself. He is nothing to me after having raised the barrier that separates him from you."

"And why are you here, pray?" asked Mrs. Musgrave, sarcasm suddenly replacing her anger.

"To offer you my protection. To take—"

"The protection that the serpent offers the dove!"

"To take you back to your friends and—"

"To meet with a very agreeable disappointment! I am obliged to you for your consideration; but, having come two thousand miles to secure the protection of my husband, I see no reason for altering my purpose, even on the invitation of so unexceptionable a gentleman as yourself!"

This speech cut Californy Kit to the heart. Her husband—that wretch! And she was so infatuated with him as to be willing to overlook what had passed under her very eyes!

Kit bit his lip and knit his brows. In that moment all hope died. Still he did not waver in his allegiance to her. He would stand by her, even if another was to reap the benefit.

Captain Flood too seemed unprepared for this.

"What!" he cried. "An open, shameless debauchee? A gambler detected at cheating! A man so lost to all decency that even a mining-camp makes an outcast of him!"

"Stop! You need not recount this to me!"

"But I insist upon it! You surely cannot know the full measure of his debasement. He was unmasked here last night by a Mexican, no doubt as bad as himself—detected with cards secreted in his vest. He has been practicing this fraud until he has cheated nearly every man in the camp. His life was spared only because the woman whom he has made the partner of his exile was a favorite with these—these ruffians! Good God, Madeline! where is your pride?—where is your womanhood?"

"I lost both the night that you put me to open shame before all the world!" wailed the woman, covering her face with her hands, and bursting into heart-broken sobs. "Let him be all that you say; what am I to stand aloof from him? A dishonored wife!—a woman!"

"Stop! stop!" cried Flood, lifting a deprecating hand.

Californy Kit's heart too leaped into his throat. A blaze of murderous hatred flamed from his eyes. His grip tightened upon his weapons; and he raised his bowie, as if to slash the muslin wall and leap through, to annihilate the man to whom such words could be addressed by the woman whom he had enshrined in the most sacred recesses of his heart.

But the next words of the captain allayed the spasm of pain that wrung his heart.

"You have no cause to apply such epithets to yourself," he went on. "Was it your fault that, in my despair at losing you, I so far forgot the reverence due you as to seize you in my arms, and so give colorable excuse for the jealousy of the man who attempted your life and mine?"

"And so," cried the woman, with cutting sarcasm, "you do not feel that there is sufficient contamination in the touch of such a man as you, with or against my will?"

Californy Kit breathed again. Scrap by scrap he was gathering a knowledge of the true relations of the actors in this fierce drama.

Captain Flood bit his lip, but with a mighty effort still repressed the outward manifestation of the rage that was secretly consuming him.

"You are hard upon me, Madeline," he said.

"But I am willing to bear that. The question now is, what are you going to do?"

"To seek my husband, and on my knees ask his pardon."

"You cannot mean that!"

"I do mean it."

"But he has forfeited every claim to consideration."

"I who have driven him to whatever he may have done am a poor one to presume to judge him."

"Driven him! How long was he in finding consolation? Has he not offered you the most deadly insult possible?"

The woman winced with pain. She pressed

her hand upon her heart, and could make no reply.

"Listen to me, Madeline!" pleaded Captain Flood. "I have come to you with all the old love, and more. I never knew until all seemed hopeless what you really were to me. Then I knew that without you life would be intolerable. I do not deny grave faults in the past; but you have the power to mold my life anew; you can make me what you will."

"I have no desire to try my hand at any such task. It is nothing to me what you are."

"But—"

"If you would really lay me under obligations to you, you will take your unwelcome presence out of my sight, and let me never see you—"

"Hear me! You have not considered! He is a ruined man financially, physically, morally, in every sense of the word. I have wealth. I can give you everything that can make life desirable. He would repudiate you, if you were to offer him wifely duty. I—I hail you as the one boon that life has to offer!"

The man's face now flushed; his eyes burned with the intensity of his tropical nature. His tongue, once fairly loosed, poured forth a torrent of passionate words.

It was so like that fatal night when he had cast himself at her feet and implored her to fly with him even at the last moment, that the woman shuddered, and could not find voice to stop him.

But when at last he paused for breath, she drew herself together to give him such an answer as would put an end to this and similar scenes forever.

"I have listened to you," she said. "Are you quite done?"

"No! no!" he urged. "I have not told you the half! I could go on forever, with the faintest hope of touching your heart in the end."

"In the absence of such hope, there is no inducement for you to continue. Now I ask you to hear what I have to say:

"If in one word I could concentrate all the scorn, all the detestation, all the loathing, all the abhorrence, all the soul-sickening disgust—"

But he did not allow her to finish her bitter vituperation.

His words, her manner, cut him to the quick.

With an oath, he started forward, all the hell of murderous hatred in his eyes.

The woman who, feeling her power while he proclaimed his love, had no fear of him, was dismayed at the storm of fury she had precipitated upon herself.

Her pitiless disdain ended in a smothered cry for help.

Instantly there was a puncture, a hissing sound, and Californy Kit leaped through the gash he had made in the canvas wall, appearing upon the scene as if he had sprung up from the ground.

"Hold!"

It was but a word; but it was enough.

Captain Flood stared at the intruder.

With a low cry, the significance of which Kit did not gather, Mrs. Musgrave pressed her hand over her bounding heart.

CHAPTER XXI.

FACE TO FACE ONCE MORE.

For one instant Captain Flood was thrown off his guard. From his black eyes leaped a look which belonged to the character of Don Diablo.

Californy Kit started. Still, the disguise had been so perfect that he did not recognize the identity of the assumed character with this the real man.

The change in Kit's face—a sudden alertness of scrutiny—restored the captain to himself.

"Who is this unceremonious intruder, may I ask?" he said, turning to Mrs. Musgrave, without apparent recognition of Kit.

"Sir!" said the lady, appealing to her hero with extended hands, "I beg of you! There is no occasion for interference. Do not make a scene, and add to the difficulties of my situation."

"Madam," answered Kit, with the marked deference which he had shown her from the first, "believe that I am entirely subservient to your will. But if you will allow me to answer for myself, you may depend on my discretion."

Her manner showed that she left her interests in his hands.

"And I," added Captain Flood, "will take your motive of discretion into account in estimating your answer."

His sneer was lost on Californy Kit.

"You will find me so frank," he returned, turning his calm eyes upon the captain's face, "that it will not tax your ingenuity to get at the exact truth."

"I have no doubt. I am favorably impressed in advance. The manner of your entrance here is sufficiently suggestive of your general gentlemanly integrity."

"Accident—" pursued Kit, ignoring his fling.

"The accident of eavesdropping!" interrupted the captain.

Quite unmoved, Kit went on without break: "—has brought to my knowledge the fact that a lady has come to this wild country on a mis-

sion painful and difficult at best, and that she is exposed to a persecution which might prove formidable to her, alone and unprotected, but the edge of which can be turned, I believe by—"

"The intervention of such a champion as yourself!"

"I accept your statement of the case. I believe that I am the man willing and capable to meet and defeat her enemies, whoever they may be."

"And this is your first act in the role you have been pleased to assume?"

"On the contrary, of one enemy I may say that I already have him on the list."

"Ah!" said Captain Flood. "I think I have heard of you already."

"In favorable terms, I trust."

"As your new lover," said the captain, turning to Mrs. Musgrave, with a savage sneer.

The lady shrunk away, covering her face with her hand, while Californy Kit turned as pale as death.

A glitter as hard as steel appeared in his eyes, and his voice sounded deep and metallic, as he said:

"You cannot use such words without a purpose which would be recognized anywhere among gentlemen."

"You shall have ample opportunity, all in due time," retorted the captain.

"Oh, no! no!" cried Mrs. Musgrave, with clasped hands. "There must be no more bloodshed! Has not punishment been visited upon me severely enough already?"

She was a daughter of the South. She had been the subject of a duel more than once, and had heard a covert challenge pass between rival lovers before.

Californy Kit bowed before her in marked reverence.

"I beg your pardon, madam!" he said.

Captain Flood laughed insultingly.

"Meanwhile," he said to Mrs. Musgrave, "I will warn you, if you still persist in your purpose to throw yourself into the arms of your husband, that he too is informed that your ruling propensity has found another exemplification, even during your short stay in this delightful country, with its long-haired heroes. It appears that he was the appreciative witness of a rather abrupt parting between you and—I presume it was this gentleman, if indeed you have not given the hero of your recent romantic adventure a successor already."

"Mrs. Musgrave," burst in Kit, "this is insufferable!"

He was white to the lips.

"Hah!" cried Captain Flood, tauntingly.

The lady, looking as if she could not much longer sustain the weight of the emotions that oppressed her, extended her hand, to check Californy Kit's resentment.

"I beg of you, sir!" she pleaded.

He bowed in silence.

"I see that this must be the first," said the captain. "I congratulate you, sir, and wish you better luck than some score or more of your predecessors. In proof of my hearty wishes for your success, I will give you the benefit of my own experience, in a piece of advice which may have even a general application, for aught I know. Make hay while the sun shines!"

"You, madam," turning to Mrs. Musgrave, "I will leave to your choice, wishing you happiness either way, or both!"

He strode toward the doorway, and as he passed Californy Kit, flung at him:

"You will hear from me in due time!"

"I shall await you with impatience," said our hero.

Captain Flood passed out with one last baleful glance at the woman who had spurned him.

"And you!" he hissed, so savagely that she shrunk shivering.

"Madam," said Californy Kit, when they were alone—and his voice assumed the low, soothing cadence which he knew so well how to throw into it—"I do not underrate the capacity of this man for evil. He is daring and subtle and implacable, I can see that. But, in offering you my protection, I think I can say, without undue assumption, that it is the protection of one not unused to coping with bad men, and bold ones."

"But, oh!" sighed the lady, "must my pathway be ever tracked with blood? You are generous, sir; but I cannot implicate you in the miseries of one so unworthy!"

"I trust that you will believe that nothing that has passed can affect the profound reverence which I feel for you."

"Ah! but what he said is only too true! I have been a heartless coquette. What you see is but just retribution for my past trifling with the happiness of others. I have brought all my miseries on myself by the indulgence of a senseless vanity."

"I beg of you, madam, that you will not say these things to me!"

Californy Kit hung his head in embarrassment. He made a poor father confessor—at least for one fair penitent.

"When shall I cease to say them to myself?" sighed the lady.

"Meanwhile," said Kit, "will you take me into your confidence sufficiently so that I can

act intelligently? I must see whom I am to guard against."

"Oh, sir! you must not go further in this matter. I have no claim upon you. I am already indebted beyond—"

"You have the claim that every unprotected woman has upon the defense of every true man. With your permission, I shall be able to act for you more effectually than without it. That is all."

Kit spoke with all respect; yet his unshakable purpose was manifest.

"But there is another reason, sir," urged Mrs. Musgrave, her cheeks flaming scarlet. "It humiliates me to be forced to say that I am so fallen in my husband's esteem that your motives will be misconstrued, to the irreparable injury of my cause. I beg you to believe"—and here her voice broke, and hot tears forced their way from her quivering lids—"that he was mistaken in his suspicions of me—that there was no cause, beyond a foolish effort on my part to show an envious rival the power which I still possessed over a man whose addresses I had rejected."

"Once more, I beg that you will not distress me and yourself by recalling the painful past."

"But I wished you—to think as well of me—as possible," stammered the lady.

Then she lifted her eyes to his face with a startled look, and dropped them again, overcome with confusion, so that she shrunk away from him tremblingly.

This, more than anything that she could have said, set Californy Kit's heart to beating wildly.

"I am prepared to believe well of you," he said, striving to command his voice, though for the first time it shook in spite of him.

"You must see, though," she went on, her voice sunk almost to a whisper, "that kindness from you—from any one—will be an added embarrassment—may defeat my efforts entirely."

Californy Kit knit his brows and bit his lip in moody silence. Everything seemed against him.

"Madam," he said at last, "if you will trust to my discretion, I will act for you at such a distance as not to compromise you. I ask only to know your enemies. Otherwise I shall be moving in the dark."

"What can I tell you? You have seen him."

"And this is the only one whom you have cause to fear?"

"The only one? I know of no other."

"But your encounter in the passage of the hotel at Slabtown?"

"With a Mexican?"

"Yes."

"I do not know who it was. He frightened me. At first—"

She broke off.

"May I ask you to continue?" urged Kit.

"Why, at first I thought I recognized him; but it was a mistake."

"That you recognized an enemy?"

"I was very unhappy. The prospect of soon meeting my husband brought the incidents of our separation even more vividly before my mind than usual, though I have dwelt upon them ever since that fatal night. My mind was just at the moment full of the man whom you have just seen—his looks, his gestures. Something in the stranger's way of looking at me, perhaps, as the light burst upon him at the opening of the door, made me for the instant feel that Captain Flood had suddenly appeared before me. Then I ran from him in affright. But, as I listened to his voice, I perceived that, though even that, oddly enough, had a suggestion of the captain's, it was yet different."

"Ah! that's it!" ejaculated Californy Kit, as it flashed upon him that it was this resemblance to Don Diablo that had made Captain Flood's face seem familiar to him.

"I think it is that they have the same intensity of the eyes," said Mrs. Musgrave, unconsciously leading Kit off the scent.

He did not reply. There was an absent look in his eyes. He was speculating whether the Spaniard might be in league with Captain Flood.

Or were the scene at Slabtown and his instrumentality in Jim Carsdale's expulsion from Canvas City only coincidences?

He could not have counted upon detecting Jim at cheating, as a part of a deliberate plot.

And yet, there was the mysterious assault upon Kit himself!

"I will set both down as enemies!" was his final decision. "Better be on the safe side."

Bravely struggling against the reaction which left her scarcely able to support her own weight, Mrs. Musgrave made her last appeal to him.

"I beg, sir," she said, brokenly, "that you will accept my gratitude, and withdraw—"

In her earnestness, she reached out and put her hand on his arm, lifting her eyes trustingly to his face.

Nothing in the world was ever more innocent than her thoughts and feelings, as she understood them.

But at that instant the flap which closed the entrance from the kitchen was pushed aside, and Miss Prudence Prouter made her appearance.

The bottom of her dress had been lifted and pinned about her waist, as is common with house-

wives in lieu of a working apron. The sleeves of her dress were rolled up to the elbow.

A rolling-pin which she carried like a policeman's baton, and flour on her hands, showed her recent employment.

She stood and stared blankly. Though her lips were silent, her eyes said:

"Well, I vum!"

Mrs. Musgrave started, snatched her hand from Kit's arm, and shrunk away from him.

"Now, Prue, if you—if you—"

But this last blow was too much. Her voice died away in a hysterical sob. Dark spots drifted before her vision. Everything seemed to spin round. She staggered a step, lifted her hands helplessly, and with a faint sigh would have fallen to the ground, but that Californy Kit sprang forward and caught her.

She drooped over his arm like a wind-broken lily.

This possession of her filled him with a delirious blending of ecstasy and pain, which intensified the fury with which he chided the intruding duenna.

"Woman!" he shouted.

But here he became dumb. What could he say to her?

Without a word she strode forward, took her mistress out of his unresisting arms, and carried her away to her room.

CHAPTER XXII.

A POISONED BARB.

OF all the camps in the Sierras, You Bet was the one which especially prided itself on its "unaltered cussedness."

As one of its prominent citizens had boasted:

"This hyar is a go-as-ye-please town, ef thar is ur ever was sich a thing on the face o' this hyar bloomin' y'arth! We don't strike no man fur no certificates o' birth, baptism, character, nor previous condition. Every galoot goes in on his own recognizance; an' ef he can't hoe his own row, he turns up his toes, an' makes room fur a better man."

"We tried this hyar Vigilantee biz wonet, an' found it no-go. The royal head center o' the Vigilantees turned out to be the biggest thief in the crowd; so we riz up in a body, an' made a clean sweep o' the board. Arter that, we 'lowed every man was his own cook an' bottle-washer. Our motto is—Root, hog, or die!"

In this paradise of outlawry the Outcasts of Canvas City pitched their tents.

Jim Carsdale sat with head hanging on his breast and brows knit in a gloomy frown, nursing his wrongs and meditating some direful vengeance.

He had neither money nor friends. His enemy had money; and with that, if he had them not already, he could easily procure backers.

What was to be done? How could he be met?

The desperate man did not stand for even terms. He was ready to accept any terms that would give him a chance at his wronger's life.

If he had followed the promptings of his savage hate, he would have thrown everything else out of consideration, and gone bushwacking for him.

But Fancy Flo prevented this desperate resort, counseling him to wait.

"Jim," she said, soothingly, her arms about his neck, "we have each other. Can't you be content with that till there's a turn in the tide? It's bound to come, if you only exercise a little patience. You're down on your luck just now. Don't crowd the mourners. Wait!"

With a view to putting as much space as possible between her and her rival, Flo would have kept on; but Jim declared that all places were alike, and the further he went from Canvas City the further he would have to go to get back.

As for remaining an exile, he swore that he would yet clean out the crowd that had banished him, and capture the town for himself.

If this was really his purpose, he could not have struck a better base of operations than You Bet.

There he could find men ready for any desperate venture; and in case of misadventure, he could retreat upon the camp, with the assurance that nothing short of a siege could give him to his enemies.

On this one point You Bet was a unit. It would rise to a man, to repel invasion.

The one thing that he needed was—the sinews of war!

Yielding gracefully, Fancy Flo set about the erection of their home. She knew that there is no such basis of contentment as comfort.

With the strength and skill of an Indian squaw, but with the outward cheerfulness of a French grisette, she erected their tent without calling upon him for assistance, knowing that in a different mood he would have taken the work entirely off her hands.

It was wonderful with what celerity everything seemed to find just the place which would make it look most cosy and homelike!

Then, with a still further insight into the workings of the human mind, she cooked a most dainty and palatable breakfast, and threw in a kiss by way of appetizer.

No man with a heart in his breast could have resisted the rippling music of her coaxing laugh and the sparkle of her eyes, knowing that it was

a brave effort to lift the load of gloom from his spirits.

Jim Carsdale rewarded her by passing his hand caressingly over her hair, and calling her his little woman, though his set features did not quite relax in a smile.

He saw her throat swell, and her eyes grow momentarily humid, with gratitude for even so much as this.

For hours thereafter he sat at the door of their tent, planning his revenge.

The new arrivals excited no intrusive curiosity on the part of denizens of You Bet. If a miner chanced to pass that way, he hailed the solitary smoker with:

"How's how, stranger?"

Getting a reply which, if not actually surly, was far from cordial, he passed on. It was none of his funeral, one way or the other.

But about the middle of the afternoon a man with a different purpose presented himself.

He was on horseback. Jim heard the approaching hoofs, but did not lift his eyes until the rider was close upon him—indeed, until he was saluted.

"A pleasant day to you!"

Jim looked up with a gathering frown; but at sight of the horseman, who sat in his saddle with a jaunty air of ease and self-satisfaction, his eyes leaped wide with astonishment, and he bent forward with a stare of piercing scrutiny.

"You appear to have seen me before, sir!"

Captain Flood's satire was so subtle, that no one unacquainted with the relations of these men would have detected it in his smile, or have heard the fine thread of mocking insolence in the tones of his voice.

Jim Carsdale had seen that face—in its present aspect—but once before; but it had been stamped upon his memory as with a brand of iron.

With a burst of profanity which let the cigar fall unheeded from his lips, he leaped to his feet, flinging his hand round to his hip.

With a graceful motion Captain Flood rose in his stirrups and swung his leg over his horse's back. As his foot touched the ground on the other side, bringing his body behind its living rampart of horse-flesh, a revolver appeared trained across his saddle, cocked, and awaiting only the slightest pressure of his finger to wing a messenger of death straight to the heart of the man he had come there to torture—adding insult to the blackest injury.

"Gently, my Christian friend!" he said, pleasantly. "It would be a pity to show you how much more accurate a shot I am than you proved yourself to be—on an interesting occasion, to which I see that I need not more definitely allude—until I have communicated a piece of information which will doubtless have a peculiar interest for you."

"Ah! I see that your charming companion is just in time to share in your pleasure."

And he bowed satirically to Fancy Flo, who, hearing Jim's ejaculation, came hastily from the tent.

"I need scarcely suggest to you, madam," he went on, "that I have the drop on the gentleman for whom you have, as I learn, manifested so tender and romantic a sentiment, to check any impulse to indiscreet interference on your part in the interview which is to follow. I have been apprised of your readiness with the instruments so greatly in vogue in this delectable country for the adjustment of personal differences of opinion. You might probably be in time to avenge the abrupt termination of your interesting idyl, but scarcely in time to stay the translation of your hero to another stage of usefulness."

Fancy Flo did not recognize the man before her. He had never before, in all his wild life in the West, appeared in his true personality.

She gazed at him as if fascinated, not daring to lift a finger; scarcely daring to breathe, lest she precipitate the danger that threatened her lover.

She had lived among desperate men long enough to recognize in this seeming stranger one of the most dangerous of his class.

"Jim! Jim!" she panted. "Don't take any chances! He's got you dead to rights!"

Jim Carsdale stood quivering from head to foot. Never had Fancy Flo seen him so moved. He was livid with rage. He did not open his lips; but if glances could slay, his would have withered the man they fell upon.

"Who are you? What do you want with us?" demanded Fancy Flo, her voice trembling as it never would have done had the peril menaced only herself.

"Your silent companion," said the captain, "will recognize in me a successful suitor for the favor of his bride. Hal hal hal!"

A shiver ran through Jim Carsdale's frame, but otherwise he did not move.

"Go about your business!" cried Fancy Flo, in a rage.

"Excuse me!" said the captain. "I have come on business. This is the only business which occupies me at present."

"Let us have it at once, then, and be relieved of your presence."

"You shall have but little cause to complain of want of directness on my part," said the cap-

tain. "I need waste but few words in informing my friend Musgrave that his shots, though well intended, were somewhat too hasty to be effective. His fickle bride he saw yesterday, alive and plumed for new conquest. His successful rival he sees before him—with how much pleasure, I gather from his expressive face! Ha! ha! ha!"

"You may spare yourself further trouble," cried Flo, hotly. "We care for neither you nor her! You may tell her so, with my compliments!"

"I regret to say that I should probably be denied that pleasure!" said the captain, with mock chagrin. "To tell you the truth, I have come to my friend Musgrave for sympathy. It seemed to me that we might console with each other. What do you think? After that interesting little episode in the conservatory she gave me—on my honor as a gentleman, she showed such bad taste and want of consistency!—she gave me what in this free-and-easy country is called 'the dirty shake.'"

"You see, it was like this. To have a romantic attachment all under the rose, with just enough delicious uncertainty about it to make rival belles green with jealousy, yet give them nothing definite to say—that was one thing. But as soon as society was scandalized, then everybody and anybody must be sacrificed to save appearances. By the way in which she cut me, you would have thought that we had had a quarrel—a most furious lovers' quarrel!—instead of the fact that her last act was to throw herself between me and her husband's pistol."

"And then the fair penitent conceived the idea of coming West here to reclaim her outraged husband—all at the behest of society, which would receive her but coldly without his countenance and protection."

Jim Carsdale did not break silence, but these cruel words told on him. He ground his teeth, and his eyes glittered with rage.

So! she was ready to use him to regain her position in society! No doubt she would resort to the same lying witcheries with which she had once before allayed his suspicions.

Horace Musgrave had never really loved the woman his marriage with whom had resulted so disastrously to both. It had piqued his vanity to win the woman for whom so many men had striven in vain.

To be made, at the very height of his triumph, a laughing-stock for those who had envied him, had wounded him more deeply than anything else could have done, and a bitter, implacable hatred and savage desperation had resulted.

It was the hurt to his vanity which made him throw his life away after that one act of desperate vengeance, just as many a man is goaded to suicide.

But Captain Flood was not yet done.

"As she recovered before I did, and, like a dutiful wife—ha! ha!—set out in quest of you, I did not know that I was in her black book until an interview with her only this morning. I followed her, hoping— Well, never mind what my hopes were. They were disappointed. That is the reason I have come to you for consolation and advice."

"Now, what do you think I discovered? Why, just to keep her hand in, no doubt, she had given me a successor! She has not been in the foothills forty-eight hours; yet, lo! a long-haired knight of the revolver and bowie! He burst in upon our interview, and was for shooting me, but that she would have no more open scandal."

"I have no reason to give you his name, since I understand that you came upon them unexpectedly, just in time to spoil their first tender leave-taking at the door of the Canvas City Hotel, and that you had your revenge on him in the evening by winning his money! Well, you have sunk low since I knew you first!"

Jim Carsdale started as if stung. Whose money had he won? He had seen no parting.

All the events of the night before were in such a muddle that he could recall but one thing clearly—the indignity of his expulsion from the camp under the charge of cheating.

Still he did not unlock the iron set of his lips.

But Fancy Flo saw her chance to break any remaining thread of allegiance to his wife.

Remember, there was this in extenuation: she believed her altogether unworthy—all that Jim himself had said and that circumstances seemed to confirm. When she thought that she would be a barrier between him and a wife who was really devoted to him, and who might yet make him happy, she had fled, crushing her own heart. But now that she contrasted her unserving loyalty with the selfish calculation of a heartless coquette, she resolved to make a desperate fight for what she called the rights of true love.

Clasping his arm, she said:

"It is true, Jim! Didn't you see how guiltily she flushed at sight of you; how she tried to escape into the hotel; how he ran away, afraid to turn his head lest you should recognize him?"

Now, whirling upon her with savage ferocity, and clutching her arm until she winced with

pain, the storm of passion that swelled his heart almost to bursting overswept the barrier of his lips.

"Whom are you talking about?" he demanded, in a low, hoarse roar.

"Californy Kit," she replied, not seeking to evade his eye. "It shamed me, too, to see you playing with him, after that. How could you?"

"Playing with him?" he repeated. "I don't know whom I played with. I saw her in the doorway of the hotel. I saw no one with her. I saw no parting."

"But he had just parted with her. She said something to him hurriedly, and he dropped her hand, and walked off without looking round. She ran into the hotel, and might have escaped without allowing us to see her face, but that her dress caught."

"Oh, Jim!"

It was a cry of pain. Unconsciously, goaded by the spasm of anguish that tortured him, he had tightened his grip on her arm until he wrung that cry from her.

Captain Flood laughed.

"Don't judge them harshly," he interposed. "The gallant Kit had just had the good fortune to save her life in a most romantic manner. Some little show of gratitude was due him. And what's in the mere pressure of a hand, after all? I assure you, it means nothing with the ladies. You and I have learned that fact pretty thoroughly!"

Still Jim Carsdale did not retort. He did not even look at the man who was torturing him.

But Captain Flood knew that his work was now done.

"Let her come now!" he said to himself. "I don't envy her the reception she will get!"

Aloud he went on:

"Inasmuch as we are fellow-sufferers, my conscience seemed to demand that I should tell you this much, by way of a preparation for overtures which will doubtless be made to you within the next twenty-four hours. If you wish to nip this new intrigue in the bud, I think you can accomplish the dashing Kit's discomfiture without difficulty, as far as the lady is concerned, though probably not without a personal encounter with Kit himself, who, I am told, is a man who lets go hard. However, I may remove this obstacle from your way, having a prior claim upon his attention."

"If you succeed, I can promise you a distinguished reception at New Orleans. You have made yourself so famous there, that people will come for miles around, just to get a sight at you."

"And now, madam," addressing Flo, "if you will kindly disarm your companion, I will wish you both a happy issue from the complications of the next day or two, and step back where I can watch the game at my leisure."

Jim Carsdale offered no resistance; but he turned his bloodshot eyes upon Captain Flood's face, and for the first time spoke to him.

"You had better kill me now, while you have the chance."

"Thank you!" said the captain, jauntily. "That isn't my trade. I'll settle with you when I get ready, in a way that will leave you no reasonable complaint."

"Jim, we'll have chance enough at him hereafter," said Flo, apologetically, as she took his weapons and laid them where the captain indicated.

Then Captain Flood swung gracefully into the saddle, and rode away.

Fancy Flo threw her arms about the man for whom her heart ached, and burst into a flood of tears.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

WHEN Mrs. Musgrave recovered consciousness she started up in a high state of excitement.

"Prue," she said, "I must go to my husband at once—do you hear?—at once! See if there is a coach going on to-day. If not, we must get a special conveyance, or even go on horseback, if necessary."

Miss Prue said not a word. Her lips were tightly compressed; she looked like virtue on a monument. If she had expressed her thoughts freely it would have been to the effect that the sooner that husband was secured the better.

She started to leave the room, but Mrs. Musgrave sprang after her and caught her by the arm.

"Look here!" she cried, fiercely. "Are you such a fool as to misjudge me like the rest of them?"

"I wouldn't be so presuming!" replied Miss Prue, shortly.

"You do! you do!" cried Mrs. Musgrave, desperately. "I believe I shall learn to hate the very sight of a man!"

Miss Prue stood with her hands crossed over her belt, in the way required by what she called "company manners." She had her own notions about men. They were too well known to need enlargement upon now.

"Go!" cried Mrs. Musgrave, setting her teeth. And Miss Prue went, as stiff as a grenadier.

The lady burst into tears when she was alone.

"What shall I do? what shall I do?" she sobbed. "I will never speak to him again—never!"

She referred to Californy Kit. Somehow, after the expression of this resolve she wept more profusely than before.

Miss Prue returned.

"There ain't no coach goin' this time o' day," she reported. "There ain't no keelage of any sort to be had. If you go on horseback you'll have to ride on a man's saddle."

"I will ride on anything or nothing. Go I will, and that without a moment's delay. If you cannot ride on a man's saddle—"

"Don't berry any trouble on my account. I've rode fractious colts bareback before I come to this benighted country."

"Order the horses at once, then."

"They're already ordered."

"Prue, you are a jewel!" cried the lady, throwing her arms about the spinster, "even if you do misunderstand me sometimes."

They set out forthwith, accompanied only by a guide recommended by the proprietor of the Canvas City Hotel.

Californy Kit saw them go. He was not bid den to follow. Mrs. Musgrave did not even look at him. Indeed, she kept her eyes on the ground, as if to avoid meeting his eye if he chanced to be about.

Should he still persist in his championship? Would he only be annoying her? Her last words had been an appeal to him to withdraw from her service.

But Californy Kit understood women. He knew that, for a sentiment which may be far from the wisest, they are always too ready to sacrifice their best interests. Moreover, it is proverbial that they not unfrequently say No when they mean Yes.

She was going upon a difficult, even dangerous mission. If he could be at hand to protect her, unseen unless imperatively demanded, that would spare her annoyance, and yet secure her safety.

Ride as she might, she could not now reach You Bet before nightfall. If he followed her at a distance he might come up with her in time to be near at the interview, under cover of the darkness.

This plan he carried out, with results which we now proceed to narrate.

As he had foreseen, the night had fallen when Mrs. Musgrave came within sight of the lights of You Bet.

The very first habitation she came to was Fancy Flo's marquee, Jim having gone not a step further than was necessary.

A camp-fire burned brightly before the tent. The girl herself was moving agilely about it, evidently employed in preparing supper.

"You may return or go on, as you please," said Mrs. Musgrave to her guide. "I shall have no further need for your services."

"Ef so be you're agreeable, then, marm," said the fellow, "I'll take a look in on the boys."

And he rode forward into the camp.

Now that she had come to the point where everything would turn upon the issue of the next few minutes, Mrs. Musgrave was overcome with sudden misgivings.

"Oh, Prue!" she said, moving close to her companion, and reaching out to take hold of her for support, "what shall I do? He may refuse to listen to me!"

"If you'd take my advice," replied Prue, sturdily, "you'd turn about and go home, sue for a divorce, and git shut o' the hull concern!"

"Thank you!" replied Mrs. Musgrave, her eyes snapping. "When I want advice again, I'll be sure to apply to you!"

In her momentary pique, she gave her horse a cut of the whip, and so came upon Fancy Flo with almost startling abruptness.

The girl looked up, saw who it was, and hastily set down the coffee-pot she was about to place over some coals.

She betrayed none of the agitation which would probably have hurried a woman accustomed to a less eventful life. Instead, her figure straightened, and her face grew cold and hard, ready for battle.

Mrs. Musgrave had met many a haughty dame, in such sparring-matches of the tongue as those in which a society belle must be ready to meet all comers, in maintenance of her laurels.

She responded to this show of defiance as an old war-horse snuffs the battle-smoke.

Slipping from her saddle, she stood before Fancy Flo with the imperious pallor, dilation of the nostrils, and flash of the eye, which is assumed to overawe the adversary.

Nancy Flo didn't overawe "worth a cent!"

"What can I do for you, madam?" she asked.

"I have come to see my husband!" replied Mrs. Musgrave.

"Your husband?" repeated Fancy Flo, coolly.

"Mr. Horace Musgrave."

"I am acquainted with no such person. Jim Carsdale lives here."

Mrs. Musgrave waved this quibble aside impatiently.

"The man who left Canvas City in your company last night."

"Ah!" said Fancy Flo, with a sarcastic lift of

the eyebrows. "I understood you to say your husband. Jim Carsdale belongs to me!"

And she flashed a look of defiance straight into the eyes of her adversary.

Mrs. Musgrave began to perceive that she had begun badly. Fancy Flo was quite a match for her at that kind of tactics.

Still she went on haughtily:

"Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Carsdale?"

"No, I cannot," replied Fancy Flo, pleasantly. "He is not at home at present, though I expect him soon, to tea."

The girl prided herself on having manners equal to any "in the States," and she now played the part of an Eastern housewife to the life.

Mrs. Musgrave felt the satire of the thing, and said, shortly:

"I will wait!"

By this time the Prouter blood was "up."

Miss Prue slipped from her saddle, and sat down on the trunk of a fallen pine, near which the fire had been built, so that the log could serve as a settle drawn up before the ingle.

Although she said not a word, she fairly bristled with the announcement:

"We've come to stay!"

Fancy Flo glanced at her, beginning to feel that she was being besieged by a rather formidable host.

Could these two women, so different, yet apparently equally determined, succeed in ousting her after all?

What part would this hard-faced Yankee spinster play in the coming contest?

Here was a person quite different from Jim, or Mrs. Musgrave, or Flo herself; and the latter began to feel uneasy, in view of her coolness and shrewdness.

Fancy Flo knew enough of human nature to know that success in the desperate game she was playing would be greatly facilitated by keeping everybody in a high state of excitement, so that reason could have no place in the mad whirl of passionate emotion.

One cool head might bring about an explanation which would set matters fatally to rights.

Did yonder stony-faced Puritan bring that cool head into the game?

Still Fancy Flo did not openly show the white feather. She threw out a line of skirmishers to worry the enemy.

"It is only fair to warn you that you may not be well received," she said, as demure as a cat.

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Musgrave, willing to see how the ground lay.

"I believe that Jim wasn't very pleasantly impressed by the abruptness, and apparent confusion, of your parting with Californy Kit—if indeed you are the person whom we saw before the Canvas City Hotel yesterday. It was a little too suggestive of old times!"

"Hah! that went home!" she said, under her breath, as she saw Mrs. Musgrave wince, flush crimson, and then turn deadly pale.

But the blow told even more forcibly than she expected. She strove to speak, but could not. She pressed her hand upon her breast, struggling to repress a storm of hysterical sobs.

Even before she found voice, it was plain that her pride had been crushed by that one fell stroke.

"Oh!" she finally burst forth, the bitter tears starting from her eyes, "you cannot—he cannot do me such injustice! Never was woman more innocent than I in this! I have come two thousand miles and more, with but one thought in my heart, to show him how bitterly I have repented my fault, and to prove to him that it was not so grave as to warrant his course—that it is not past forgiveness!"

"Madam," said Fancy Flo, as cold and hard as steel, "I have no interest in your affairs; nor need you be to the trouble to vindicate yourself in my eyes. I only sought to prepare you for an unsatisfactory interview by warning you that you have come two thousand miles out of your way."

"Listen to me!" pleaded Mrs. Musgrave, stretching forth her hands in piteous appeal. "I come to you so broken with misery that I throw myself on your pity, if your sense of right does not move you to yield your influence over my husband, and give him back to me!"

"Your sense of right must be remarkably obtuse, if you do not feel that you have forfeited all just claim to him, if you ever had any."

"No! no! no! My worst fault was a vain girl's foolish trifling, by which I brought upon myself the appearance of evil! But I do assure you that, from the plighting of my troth with him, I never had a thought of disloyalty."

Fancy Flo shrugged her shoulders.

"I beg to remind you again," she said, with the slight wrinkling of the brows of one who is politely bored, "that all this is nothing to me. Since Jim knows you better than I do, I am willing to accept his estimate of the reliability of your word. Pray, madam, reserve your strength for the real task which is before you. I think you will require it all."

"Miserable creature!" burst forth the unhappy wife, goaded beyond endurance by this cool insolence.

"Oh!" cried Fancy Flo, with a beaming smile

and the ring of amusement in her voice, "if you adopt that tone, I think I can meet you with a retort of—miserable creature yourself! May I ask—how many lovers have you had since your marriage?"

Mrs. Musgrave dropped her face into her hands, and turned away with a wail of distress.

Miss Prudence Prouter, who thus far had not interfered, now rose and put a supporting arm about the unhappy wife.

"You look as if you had something on your mind," said Flo, meeting Miss Prue's reproving stare with a pleasant smile. "Don't hesitate to relieve yourself. You'll feel better; and I shall be none the worse."

She was flushed with the tingling delight of conquest. She wanted to try conclusions with this new antagonist.

But Miss Prue developed a mode of attack for which she was wholly unprepared.

With the grim serenity of two centuries of Puritan blood, she said:

"I leave such as you to the forgiveness of a long-sufferin' God!"

And Fancy Flo felt as if a dart of ice had pierced her to the heart.

The flush of triumph fled her cheek, and she bit her lip in chagrin.

However she might have parried this thrust, she was spared the task by the clatter of rapidly approaching hoofs, and a ringing:

"Whoop!"

This gave her her cue.

"And I," she replied, "leave you to the tender mercies of Jim Carsdale!"

He came at a headlong gallop, a dwarf pine hiding from his view the group about the fire, until he was directly upon them.

He drew his horse upon his haunches so abruptly as to scatter bits of rock and earth in a shower before him.

He seemed to see but one figure. He stared at his wife with eyes that glared with the baleful light of alcohol and of passions given the rein until they had borne him to the verge of insanity.

One glance at his set face, and the woman who had given her happiness into his keeping shrunk cowering away, clinging to her faithful friend, hiding her face in her breast, and sobbing like a terrified child:

"Take me away!—oh, take me away! I'm afraid!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

CALIFORN KIT TO THE RESCUE.

Now, if ever, was the time for the Prouter blood to show itself; and it did, right royally.

"The women-folks o' the Prouter stock never budge fur no livin' man!" was Miss Prue's boast.

And there was no blanching of the cheek, nor wavering of the eye, as she stood her ground; no unsteadiness of the voice, as she encouraged her companion.

"Stiddy yer narves, Mis' Musgrave. He can't eat ye up with them big eyes o' his'n. An' I vum ef I'd come this fur, only to let that brazen piece git the best o' me!"

It needed only this reference to her rival to spur the wife to renewed self-assertion.

Freeing herself from the arms of her companion, she took a step toward her advancing husband, saying:

"Horace, listen to me!"

"I'll listen to you!" he cried, striding forward. "I'll ram the lying words down your throat!"

And to the astonishment of everybody, no one of whom thought even him capable of such unmanliness, he aimed a blow at his wife's mouth.

Too late to avoid it, she realized what he was about to do.

With a low moan of distress—in the presence of actual danger, she seemed beyond the reach of fear—she bowed her head, only lifting her hands, so as partly to break the force of the blow.

With an oath, he struck her to the earth!

With a cry of bursting indignation, Miss Prue leaped before him, her hand clinched, her eyes blazing scorn and defiance.

"You coward! You unmanly brute!" she cried. "Strike me, if you dare!"

She had the courage of a lion. Unfortunately, her bodily strength was not equal to her stout soul.

"Bah!" he cried, contemptuously.

And with a sweep of his arm he thrust her from his path.

"I'll finish the work I begun so badly in New Orleans!" he declared.

And drawing his bowie, he advanced once more upon his wife, who lay moaning upon the ground.

But Fancy Flo was not ready for this. Indeed, she would not have had him use violence of any sort.

She was humiliated at what he had done; but excused him in her heart on the plea that he had been drinking, and was not himself.

She now sprung forward, and caught his arm, crying:

"Jim! Jim! you shall not do that!"

He turned his bloodshot eyes upon her, draw-

ing back his left fist, to relieve himself of this new embarrassment in the most summary way.

But she looked him steadily in the eye, never flinching.

"No, no, Jim!" she persisted. "You may strike me, and I will forgive you. But you shall not take her blood on your hands. They would lynch you, Jim!—you know that as well as I do. It is because I love you that—"

"Lynch me! Let them lynch and be hanged! Take your hands off—will you?—before I do you a bodily injury!" and he strove to shake himself free.

But she clung to him the more wildly.

"Jim! Jim! if you love me!" she pleaded. "You will separate us forever! Jim! Jim! oh, Jim!"

But he wrung her hands loose, and flung her aside roughly.

"Hang or no hang," he ground his teeth, "the woman who undertakes to mop up the ground with Horace Musgrave shall learn that it can't be done with impunity!" and he lent over his defenseless victim.

She opened her eyes and fixed them on his face. They were stony in their stare of albert terror. No sound of appeal issued from her parted lips. Her very breath was suspended, as she waited thus to be hurled into the dread Unknown!

Miss Prue had recovered her balance in time to see the impending tragedy, and to throw up her hands with an impotent shriek, but too distant to interpose the slightest barrier.

But the air rung with a cry that made the very crags re-echo. A shower of sparks was scattered in every direction, as a flying foot struck among the embers of the fire. A dark body shot past, striking that of the would-be murderer like a stone propelled from a catapult. And the two rolled over and over on the ground.

Then ensued a snarling, as of wild beasts engaged in deadly combat. The vegetation was torn up and the dirt flung about.

Presently one man—his hair flying wild, his clothes torn and soiled, his white face streaked with dirt and blood—maintained his position uppermost, pinning his adversary to the ground in helpless subjection.

For an instant the women stood breathless; then Flo realized that her Jim was not the conqueror.

At the same instant Miss Prue recognized the commanding features of Californy Kit; and her obstinate heart, for the first time, was pierced with something like womanly admiration for a man.

Kit had carried out his plan, approaching quite close to the spot on the further side of the tent, assured that there was little danger of his being observed by the absorbed actors in that tragic scene; neither had he counted upon Jim's abruptness of action in striking his wife, and so could not oppose the slightest protection from that cowardly fist.

So enraged was he at seeing her fall before that brutal blow, that he would have shot the inflictor of it on the spot, but for the thought that such vengeance, however well-merited, would raise up an impassable barrier of blood between him and the woman he loved more and more passionately, the more he witnessed her wrongs.

When the cowardly deed was done, another consideration restrained him from springing at once to the defense of the fallen wife.

He was there against her will. He had no right to interpose his protection—and so, by confirming her husband's jealousy, cut off all chance of a reconciliation—as long as there was the shadow of a hope that her object might yet be accomplished.

Husbands have struck their wives; wives have been knocked down; and yet the breach has been patched up, and the miserable parody of a union passed muster with a not-over-critical world.

But the determined purpose of murder swept all these scruples aside; and Kit leaped to the rescue like a tiger springing upon its prey.

The momentary check interposed by Fancy Flo was just sufficient to enable him to cross the intervening space; and the murderer went down before the resistless impetus of his onset.

Now he held him by the throat, firmly choking him to death!

Fancy Flo saw and realized her lover's danger. She saw the implacable resolve—never to relax his hold until his victim was dead!—in Californy Kit's set face; and then, with the cry of a tigress, she plucked a stiletto from her bosom and leaped to the rescue.

But there was Yankee blood and Yankee muscle "to the fore" just then.

Miss Prue Prouter sprang between, seizing the girl by both wrists, upholding the vengeful hand, and bending the other behind Flo's back, as she clasped her in a vigorous embrace with her own right arm.

Gently, it is said, as cool as a cucumber. "You ain't called to the work of interference here."

"Release me! Let me go, I say!" cried Flo, struggling fiercely, "or I'll use this knife upon you!"

"Not if I know myself, you won't! Prue Prouter wa'n't set over a ward o' lunatics for a year for nothing. Why, you're a kitten to the least of 'em!"

Lifting Flo with scarcely any apparent effort, the spinster kicked her feet from under her and threw her to the ground on her side as dexterously as any wrestler could have done it.

Rage as the girl might, and driven frantic by the thought that her lover was being strangled to death, she did writhe and scream like a wildcat—she was held firmly and disarmed by the Yankee duenna.

"If one o' them men must die," she said, "you may depend it won't be the best one! He wa'n't born to be snuffed out by the hand of a woman, an' s'ich a woman as you!—at any rate, not to-night."

Not that Prue Prouter was indifferent to the death of even Jim Carsdale. It was only when it came to an issue between him and a better man, as she said, that she would prevent interference with a cool determination seldom manifested by her sex.

When she was satisfied that she had Fancy Flo completely in her power, and could keep her out of mischief, she sought to do what she could to prevent the unlawful slaying of even a would-be murderer.

"Mis' Musgrave!" she called, sharply, "will you lay there an' see murder done before your face an' eyes? Your husband will be killed if you don't call that road-agent chief off of him!"

The idea that Californy Kit was in reality a captain of banditti playing the honest gentleman had found deep lodgment in her mind, so that it came uppermost even in her excitement.

Mrs. Musgrave, who, since the passing of that deadly peril, had lain almost in a swoon, started up, putting her hand to her head, and gazing about her in bewilderment.

"What? Where?" she cried, incoherently.

"Don't you see?" said Prue, nodding toward where Californy Kit yet held his victim with the implacable tenacity of a bull-dog. "He is killing your husband! Make him stop!"

Mrs. Musgrave scrambled to her feet, tottered to where the contestants lay—Jim Carsdale now very nearly unconscious and struggling but feebly—and seizing Kit by the shoulders, cried:

"Oh, sir! you must not! I beg of you!"

It was but a feeble cry, and her efforts to drag Kit from his prey would have amounted to nothing in themselves; but she attracted his attention—a not easy task in the light of his excitement, for he had been stirred to the depths of his soul by the dastardly attack upon her, and he turned his stern face and blazing eyes toward her.

"You must not kill him!" she pleaded, swaying from side to side, as if she could scarcely keep upon her feet. "You must not!—you must not! Oh, release him at once!"

At the same instant a horseman whose approach none of them had noticed drew his plunging horse short up, and, with presented revolver, shouted:

"Hold on here! If there is to be any killing done on this spot, it shall be done by at least a Vigilance Committee! Release that man, or I will fire upon you!"

Californy Kit turned only his eyes, to see that his challenger was Captain Flood!

Ignoring him, he looked back into Mrs. Musgrave's face, and said, in a low, collected, dignified voice, bowing deferentially:

"Madam, your word is law," and at once he withdrew his hands from the throat of his foe.

"But, with your permission, I will first render this madman harmless."

And possessing himself of Jim Carsdale's arms with the dexterity of a man who had learned to perform that operation in desperate circumstances, he threw them out of reach into the darkness.

Miss Prouter showed her coolness and self-confidence by acting as promptly.

"Now, miss," she said, "if you think you can behave yourself, you may git up."

And she rose, taking the precaution, however, to imitate Californy Kit, by throwing away the knife of which she had dispossessed the girl whom she had overcome.

Fancy Flo, released, arose, flung her long and now disheveled hair back from her face, glared around on all present, and, without a word, ran to Jim's assistance.

She had but one thought. He came before all the world else.

Meanwhile, Californy Kit had turned to address Mrs. Musgrave.

"Madam," he said, taking her arm gently, to lead her to a seat on the fallen pine tree, "I hope that you are not seriously hurt."

"No—oh, no!" replied the lady.

She looked away from him while answering, toward her husband, who lay in the shadow so that she could not clearly make out his features.

"But, he?—you have not injured him?"

And she took a step toward the recumbent body, to bend over it for examination.

But at that instant Fancy Flo flashed between her and the object of her solicitude.

"Back! back!" she cried, flinging out her arms to bar access. "You shall not touch him! You shall not look at him! He is nothing to

you, nor you to him! Stand back, I say: or I will tear your accursed face with my nails! Dead or alive, he belongs to me!"

Her face ghastly white with despair, her features rigid, her eyes blazing, her hair torn down and falling about her shoulders like a great tangled mane, she looked like one of the fabled furies.

Mrs. Musgrave shrunk back from her in dismay.

With a cry that would have gone to the heart of the least sympathetic of them in a calmer moment, Fancy Flo turned and cast herself on the body of her lover, crying:

"Jim!—oh, Jim!"

She clasped him in her arms, and appealed to him wildly to know if they had killed him.

When he showed signs of life, she fell to sobbing over him and kissing him frantically.

CHAPTER XXV.

A TRAP SPRUNG.

MEANWHILE Captain Flood had leaped from his saddle.

Approaching Mrs. Musgrave on the side opposite to that on which Californy Kit yet held her arm with respect as marked as if she were a queen and he the humblest and most honored of her subjects, he said:

"Madame, believe me, I did not dream of such a scene as this. However degraded, I supposed him still to retain the instincts of a gentleman sufficiently to make it impossible for him to strike a woman.

"But I followed you to apologize for my own harshness, and to ask you to remember that it was under the lash of your scorn.

"Will you pardon me, and give me a chance to retrieve my place at least in your confidence and respect, by escorting you away from these rude scenes for which you are so entirely unfitted? I will ask no privilege save that of serving you as a trusted friend. I will never again obtrude sentiments that are distasteful to you. I promise—"

"Spare yourself and me, Captain Flood," interrupted the lady, striving to disguise the repulsion with which she shrunk from him.

"There can never be even the semblance of cordiality between us again. I—"

"Stay! stay! At least let me make some atonement—"

"There is none needed, unless, indeed, you will relieve me of the pain of this contention."

The baffled man bit his lip, and his eyes gleamed under his drooping lashes.

"Say that you forgive me!" he urged.

"I—I—"

She stammered, feeling the utter insincerity of such a profession.

"Enough!" he said, bowing and stepping back.

He lifted his eyes and met Californy Kit's cold glance.

He could not repress a frown at him.

"I congratulate you, sir," he said, his lip curling with a sneer of ferocious jealousy. "At the same time, I shall try to make your triumph as short-lived as possible."

"You must have won your shoulder-straps in piping times of peace," said Californy Kit, with a satirical smile. "However, your martial valor will be proved, I have no doubt—in our next war."

"You will not live to see it," snapped the captain.

"No," acquiesced Kit, coolly. "My family is not remarkable for exceptional longevity—averaging only ninety, or thereabouts."

"I guess," said Miss Prue, here stepping forward with the evident intention of relieving Kit of the care of her charge, "that we kin git along more peaceable without the escortin' of either of you gentlemen. Jest as much obligeed to you, sir."

But Kit did not yield readily.

"I beg your pardon!" he said, bowing to Miss Prue.

Then, turning to Mrs. Musgrave:

"Madam, the exigency is too serious to allow mere forms to prevail over the plain dictates of common sense. What has happened shows that your personal safety is at stake. You must see that nothing like reconciliation is possible with a man in that state of mind."

"I fear that that is so," sighed Mrs. Musgrave, clinging to his arm.

"I would advise that you do not even remain in this vicinity."

"But where can I go? Back to Canvas City, and abandon my purpose?"

"You would be safer there than in You Bet. This is no place for a lady."

"I will return," decided Mrs. Musgrave, promptly.

"If you object to allowing me to accompany you, I will endeavor to secure you an escort—"

"None will be so acceptable as yourself, if you will be so kind. Your course from the first has proved that I can trust you in all things—in wisdom, in courage, and in courtesy."

A flush of embarrassment swept over Californy Kit's face, and his voice was low with profound emotion, as he bowed, and said:

"Madam, I have no words to express my sense

of your kindness. Believe that now and ever my life is at your service."

Captain Flood could endure no more.

"Curse them! have they the cheek to carry on their billing and cooing under my very nose?" he mused, half suffocating with rage.

And with a smothered oath he leaped upon his horse, and rode away toward the center of the camp.

There was nothing "crooked" about this move. He went directly to the leading saloon, and could easily have proved an alibi during the events that followed.

"Let us lose no time," said Californy Kit, with a glance toward Jim Carsdale. "He is recovering himself, and may seek to make further trouble."

"If I could only get him to listen to me!" sighed Mrs. Musgrave, glancing wistfully toward the spot where Fancy Flo yet bent over her fallen lover.

"If you still think that anything can be done to soften his alienation, another attempt may be made at some more promising time, but not now. I beg your pardon for mentioning it, but he is—not quite himself."

The lady felt the delicacy of this way of putting the fact that Jim was "in liquor."

"I can but thank you for your consideration," she said.

With Kit's assistance the ladies remounted, and at once rode away in the direction of Canvas City.

They were scarcely in the saddle when Jim recovered himself sufficiently to sit up and look about him.

His eye was attracted toward the retreating figures by the sound of their horses' hoofs; and he at once sprung to his feet with a volley of furious oaths.

"My revolver!—where is my revolver?" he cried, flinging his hand round to his hip. "Curse them! they have disarmed me! Give me a weapon of some kind—anything! I will cut their black hearts out!"

He looked about on the ground for the knife which he remembered to have had when Californy Kit fell upon him.

Fancy Flo appealed to him.

"Jim! dear Jim!" she cried, seizing hold of his arm, "don't follow this thing up any further. We've got shut of them. Let's be content with that."

Despairing of finding the weapon he sought, he turned upon his companion.

"Give me your darringer!" he cried, reaching out to take it from her.

"No, no, Jim!" she cried, springing back.

"Give it to me, I say!" he shouted, angrily.

"They will get off! And they have stamped my horse! Where is the beast? Give me the weapon, girl!"

He succeeded in seizing her; but thrusting her hand into her bosom and drawing forth the little instrument of death, she threw it behind her as far as she could in the darkness.

"Curse you! what do you mean?" he shouted, giving her a wrench that nearly threw her from her feet, and drawing back his fist to strike her, by way of punishment for frustrating his design.

"I mean to save you from being shot by Californy Kit, or hanged by the Vigilantes!" she said, looking him steadily in the eye.

"We'll see about Californy Kit, and the Vigilantes, too!" he said.

And he felt for the stiletto which he knew she carried.

But it will be remembered that she had been deprived of even that weapon by the determined action of Miss Prue.

"Jim!" she pleaded, throwing her arms about his neck, "if you love me, be guided by me. Drop this where it is."

"I'll drop the whole infernal crew before I'm through with them!" cried the infuriated man.

And execrating his luck, he ran to secure his horse, which he discovered at no great distance.

In vain did Fancy Flo call after him, fearing that he was about to pursue Californy Kit empty-handed.

Instead, he dashed toward the heart of the camp, bent upon securing a weapon, if only for temporary use, with which he could follow up his mad project of revenge.

Willing to incur any risk to herself from his anger, Fancy Flo mounted, and followed him.

Meanwhile Californy Kit and the ladies under his charge pressed forward on their return to Canvas City.

Miss Prue, apparently as tough as wholehops, showed no signs of fatigue. Her practice in mastering fractious colts, lunatics, and horrid men-critters, had evidently inured her to exertion.

But Mrs. Musgrave, what with her long ride and the protracted strain on her sensibilities, was well-nigh exhausted.

Kit pressed upon her a drink of liquor from his flask, and thus in a measure fortified her flagging energies.

When they had made about half the distance, and the time was well on toward midnight, Kit allowed them to stop and rest, seated on a flat ledge of rock by the roadside.

Then Mrs. Musgrave sought to vindicate herself in the eyes of the man whose good opinion she had begun to value more than she herself was aware.

"If you will allow me, sir," she said, struggling against strong agitation, "I should wish you to know the causes which have led to my questionable situation—how far I have been truly at fault, and how far the victim of appearances."

"Madam," said Kit, "I hope you will spare yourself this painful recital. I beg you to believe that I acquit you, without a hearing, of any wilful error."

"Your generous pity of my forlorn state would move you to such partiality," said the lady; "but I cannot be blind to the compromising features of my relations to these two men, which will press upon your attention on future reflection. In justice to myself—"

"I cannot but yield to such a consideration," said Kit. "Be assured that your feelings are my only concern."

She thanked him, and then set about her story.

She did not disguise the fact that she had been a vain and thoughtless girl. She did not even seek extenuation in the fact that she had been courted for her wealth and beauty enough to turn the head of any woman.

She had trifled with the affections of her suitors, parading her conquests very much as an Indian brave vaunts his scalps—all after the most approved manner of a society belle.

She had shown no mercy to her competitors of her own sex; and so had won not a few mortal enemies—enemies who kissed her and called her dear while their secret hearts were acrid with envy.

Captain Flood she had captured, dragging him from the very chariot-wheels of a Creole beauty who held him as her choicest prize.

Then came Horace Musgrave, who piqued himself on his uniform success with women.

The fact was—though Mrs. Musgrave did not put it exactly in this way—that it had been about a drawn battle between these two. Each gratified the social ambition of the other; and so their marriage had been brought about without any real love on either side.

On the very evening of her nuptials it came to the ears of the bride that her discomfited rival had intimated that, tiring of his vassalage, at no time very abject, Captain Flood had not unwillingly seen himself supplanted by Horace Musgrave.

Then into the foolish head of the new-made bride came the idea of making good her boast of "once her slave, always her slave," and showing to the world that even then she could call her old lover to her feet at will.

In this she succeeded only too well.

It gave the rival an opportunity to bring an infuriated groom upon the scene.

It is hurt self-love that turns the lover or husband into an implacable avenger.

Horace Musgrave struck to kill.

But, his pride shattered, he was hurt to the death. He could not face the world, a laughing-stock. In his insane chagrin, he went to the dogs at one plunge.

Captain Flood had been partly right, in saying that social considerations had sent Mrs. Musgrave in quest of her husband. But, too, there had been a nobler motive. She felt the wrong that had been done him; and her sense of wifely duty was strong enough to make her believe that she sought him through love.

"It is bad enough at best," she said, in conclusion; "but I wish you to believe that there was never a thought of real disloyalty to my husband."

Californy Kit expressed his faith in her integrity and his sympathy with her misfortune, and they resumed their way to Canvas City.

They were passing through a narrow defile—a place made for ambuscades—when suddenly Californy Kit heard a faint hurdling sound—a sound in which his sensitive ear could not be deceived.

"Down!" he shouted, on the instant, bowing to his horse's neck, by way of example, and driving the spur into the animal's flank. "We are attacked! Look out for a lasso!"

He turned his head sidewise, and saw the serpent-like coil outlined against the sky. It had been aimed at himself; and as it settled down about him, he slipped partly out of the saddle, as an Indian screens himself by hanging at the side of his horse.

But the abruptness of the movement, and a side plunge of the horse to escape the spur, threw him so far to the side that he hung by the heel of his boot catching on the edge of the cantle of his saddle; and at the same instant his foot slipped through the stirrup on the other side; so that he could not dismount, and if now his saddle turned, or he lost his hold on the cantle with his heel, he must inevitably be dragged to death under the feet of his flying horse.

It was equally impossible for him to regain his place in the saddle. He could but wind his hands in the mane of his runaway horse, and hang on for life!

So he was swept away, from his enemies, but also from the protection of the woman he loved.

If she had fallen into some trap set by the wily Spaniard—it was of him that Kit thought—she might never know that, never a deserter with his life, he had been borne away in spite of himself.

But he was face to face with the menace of a most awful death! If his strength failed before his horse stopped, or on the intervention of the slightest accident, he would be precipitated to a fate without a name!

CHAPTER XXVI.

DIABLO'S WOOING.

Mrs. Musgrave did not understand Californy Kit's warning. Startled by his abrupt shout and actions which portended a danger of the nature of which she could not form the remotest conception, her first impulse was to draw in her horse.

Her attendant, who was on the other side of her, grasped the situation more fully.

To her cool, practical head did not come confusion with alarm, as was natural with the woman all unused to meeting danger.

"Go on!" cried Miss Prue, striking Mrs. Musgrave's horse with her whip, and then lashing her own.

But her horse, shying at the hurtling lasso, wheeled in his tracks; and out from the side of the road leaped a shadowy form, which seized Mrs. Musgrave's horse by the bridle, and threw him back upon his haunches.

Others followed, starting out of the gloom on either side; and the women were prisoners in a moment, while Californy Kit was borne away on the back of his runaway horse like the wind.

"After him—after the snoozer!" shouted a voice which might have been recognized as that of Bill Sligo. "He outflanked us once. He gave us the slip on the way out. If he shakes us now, the Cap'll begin to think it's gittin' monotonous—an' right he'll be!"

There was the sound of some one running in the darkness; a momentary pause; then the voice of a man urging a horse through the undergrowth; and horse and rider leaped into the road, and sped in pursuit of the runaway.

"Shoot if necessary!" was Bill Sligo's parting injunction.

He it was who held Mrs. Musgrave's bridle-rein. She almost fell from her saddle in a swoon, as he turned and addressed her.

"Madam," he said, roughly, yet not discourteously, "you hain't no call fur to be skeered of we-uns. It's a better-lookin' cuss nor yer humble sarvent as is 'lowin' to put up fur ye. Jest you take things easy, an' ye're all right. But we don't take no stock in no slide-outs, nor no cryin' small, nor woman business generally, ye understand."

"I will obey you," said the captive in a quavering voice. "Do not offer us personal violence."

"Violence nothin'!" assured the ruffian. "Thar's whar yer head's level. Obey orders, an' I'm yer solid friend!"

But Miss Prue took a more active view of the situation.

"You ruffian! Let go my horse!" she cried, aiming a blow with her whip at her captor.

The first stroke told; but on repetition the whip was caught and wrenched from her hand.

"Easy, you she wilcat!" growled the outlaw.

The spinster, quick to see the uselessness of further resistance, turned to her companion in misfortune.

"It is all a trick!" she cried. "Didn't I tell you that he was a road-agent chief? These are his men. His goin' off that way is only a blind."

But Mrs. Musgrave was not ready to accept this solution.

"Hush, Prue!" she said. "How can you? Isn't our situation forlorn enough, without casting suspicion on our only friend—our only hope of rescue?"

Miss Prue snorted with disgust. It was useless to argue the matter. Nothing, she thought, but infatuation could be so blind to patent facts.

Meanwhile other horses were brought into the road, on which the whole party of way-layers mounted, and set off briskly after Californy Kit and his pursuer.

Not long after, they were rejoined by the fellow, returning.

"Cap," he said to Sligo, "the devil himself couldn't ketch that outfit. Californy Kit's got the best hoss in this section—you know that. You might run him into Canvas City; but it'd be no-go."

"We hear ducks!" said Miss Prue, in the height of her disgust.

"Eh! what's that?"

"The lady 'lows as Californy Kit's runnin' we-uns on grub-stakes," explained Bill Sligo.

At which the whole crowd burst into a laugh.

"That's right, marm. Jest you pile yer chips on that thar keerd. Kit, he's a sly old coon, is Kit."

"You'd better save some o' that fur the boss," interposed Sligo. "What's to be done?"

"Better luck next time!"

"Ef the old man kicks after what we bring him, he's a grunter—that's my say!"

"We won't make nothin' chinnin' hyar in the starlight."

"Git, then!"

And the whole party turned round and rode at a full gallop back over the way they had come.

But at a little distance beyond the place of ambush, they turned sharply off the road, and plunged into what seemed to the captives the trackless wilderness of crag and canyon.

This rough riding completed the exhaustion of Mrs. Musgrave's slight remaining strength.

"I can go no further," she pleaded, faintly. "You will have to let me rest. I shall fall from the saddle."

"Thar's an easy remedy fur that, marm," said Sligo.

"A remedy?"

"I'll hev the exquisite pleasure o' carryin' yer. Ef so be ye'll be so good as to tell the boss the sarcumstances, howsomdever, so's't he won't shoot off the top o' my head—"

"You cannot subject me to such an outrage!" cried the lady.

"It's your say-so, marm," replied Sligo. "Our orders is to report to headquarters with yer."

But here the practical Prue interposed with the suggestion that a stimulant would enable her to proceed without assistance.

Thus sustained, Mrs. Musgrave continued to the end of their journey, which proved to be a secluded gulch which was reached not long before daybreak.

Here the bandits protected themselves and their horses from the eye of even some chance prospector skirting the neighboring heights, beneath the shelter of brush huts, so cunningly constructed that even quite close at hand they could not be detected from the natural growth.

Ever on the move to evade pursuing justice, the outlaws could not construct more substantial habitations than these.

Mrs. Musgrave was glad of any place where she could lie down; and, in spite of the anxieties of her situation, she at once sunk into the profound sleep of utter exhaustion, which lasted for hours.

Miss Prue would not lie down, but in a sitting posture dropped off into dozes, from which she would start at the slightest suspicious sound.

When food was brought to them, such as the men ate with the unquestioning relish of mountaineers, the spinster turned up her nose at it with a contemptuous sniff.

"I'll see what I can do in that line myself, if you'll give me the raw materials," she said.

"All right, marm," was the answer. "Help yerself."

Which she did, with more acceptable results.

With a coolness which never seemed to desert her, the Yankee spinster conversed with the men, all of whom were masked, and reconnoitered the gulch as far as she was allowed to.

Her most ingenious questions could draw nothing from her captors; and to her unpracticed eye the gulch they were in looked like all others that she had seen.

The afternoon was well advanced, and Mrs. Musgrave was awake, greatly refreshed, when Don Diablo presented himself, with no attempt at disguise, as it seemed to his captives.

He entered the brush wickiup with a ceremonious bow, but seated himself on a log intended for that use, without waiting for an invitation.

Miss Prouter stood sternly watchful and defiant. If she was afraid of her captor, she certainly was not one to seek to placate him by cringing.

Mrs. Musgrave manifested her timidity by keeping close to her sturdy companion, by the restlessness of her movements, by the unsteadiness of her voice, and by the uncertainty of her glance. Yet she strove bravely to maintain a womanly dignity and an outward calm.

"Sir," she said, "are we to look to you as the author of this outrage?"

"Senora," replied Don Diablo, "I have the honor to entertain you. But I pray that you will be seated, that we may converse the more at our ease."

And he waved his hand toward a rude seat which she had abandoned on his entrance.

Almost involuntarily she sunk into it, feeling that she could with difficulty sustain herself because of nervous weakness.

Don Diablo silently indicated another seat for Miss Prue, but she replied stiffly:

"Thanked if it's the same to you, I shall feel more in my place to stand—in such a presence."

Don Diablo smiled and bowed his acquiescence, and turned his attention to Mrs. Musgrave.

The unmasked admiration in his gaze made her shrink with dread; but she strove to steady her voice as she said:

"I suppose we are to consider ourselves your prisoners?"

"If senora would honor me by substituting guests!"

"Guests against our will, dragged here by force, at your command—it is all the same. Do you intend to hold us for a ransom?"

"A ransom?" repeated Don Diablo, still keeping his eyes on her face. "And what would be a fit recompense for so fair a captive?"

"I suppose you have your own price," replied the lady, coldly.

"Were I to fix my own valuation," said the Don, with the air of gallantry, "it would be complimentary to the beautiful senora, but would drive her friends to despair."

A sickening sense of dread almost paralyzed the lady's power of speech. She had suffered so much that she was apprehensive of even worse in store for her.

"No doubt," she said, "you gauge your demand by the presumed ability to pay."

"In that case, what would senora's friends be willing to sacrifice to secure her safe restoration?"

"It is what I would pay you out of money belonging to myself."

"And that?"

"Whatever you demand."

"Ten thousand, say?"

"Yes."

"Twenty? It is possible that—"

"I will see that you receive twenty thousand."

"Ah! senora is a prize in more senses than one! But then, money is a bagatelle in extremity. I fancy she would not grudge fifty thousand, if—"

"I pledge my word to send you fifty thousand, if so much can be raised on my property at a forced sale. But that, if I succeed in realizing so much, will leave me with scarcely a dollar in the world. It will be useless for you to try to exact more."

"Yet," said the Don, reflectively, "I had thought of a somewhat higher rate."

"I have no more."

"But senora has friends."

"What will satisfy you?"

"I had concluded that one of such exquisite beauty, of such celestial grace, of a charm that is nameless, is worth to me a hundred millions, at least."

"A hundred—"

Mrs. Musgrave gasped so much, not seizing his meaning.

"Millions," added Don Diablo, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Then a wave of color swept her face.

"I—I—do not—comprehend you!" she panted, faintly.

"Let me tell senora something of myself," said the Don. "I may thus make my purpose clear to her."

"You see me here a free rover, living like a mediaeval baron—without his castle, to be sure, but with stout retainers at my back, and with no suzerain to exact vassalage. To me money is nothing. When I wish to amuse myself with that gilded toy for which the world has gone into voluntary peonage, all men are my bankers."

"But beauty—that royalty to which kings do homage; the electric touch of a soft hand; the thrilling cadence of a low, sweet confession of love; a tender sigh!—these are not to be bought with a price; but they have been won, the world over, by stout hearts and strong hands. I have hoped to win you, senora, by showing you that, for your sake, I dared to defy the united force of this whole region. For, long ere this, a hundred men—to be augmented, no doubt, before night to five hundred—are scouring the country, to rescue you, and punish your abductor."

"But, if this is true, you cannot hope to long evade such a search," cried Mrs. Musgrave, eagerly.

Don Diablo smiled.

"You will not like me the less," he said, "if I have combined the cunning of the fox with the boldness of the lion. I have the happiness to be the commander—one of the most zealous for your recovery, and loudest in denunciation of the villains who have abducted you!—of a company of rescuers—all secretly in my pay—who have undertaken to leave not a stone unturned in the region of which this spot is the center."

Mrs. Musgrave uttered a low murmur of despair, and clasping the hands of her companion in captivity, buried her face in the folds of her dress.

"It is needless to say," pursued the Don, "that we shall probably be unsuccessful, until you have consented to the attendance of a certain good padre, whom my donations to the Church make quite complaisant to whatever little peccadilloes he may suspect—or indeed observe—in my dealings with the world."

"Do you mean to say," cried the lady—"That as Senora Raviero—the name by which I am known—there will be no obstacle to your early restoration to the comforts of civilization?"

"It shall never be, on such terms!" cried the outraged lady.

"Those are the easiest that I offer," said the Don, coolly. "I beg that you do not compel me to present the alternative."

"What alternative?"

"You refuse my—"

"Absolutely! You cannot be so foolish as to think for a moment otherwise!"

"I have been so infatuated, if you will."

"Undeceive yourself, then. Come! your worst?"

"With reluctance, senora."

"You need not spare me. Proceed!"

"My friend, the padre, is very complaisant, senora."

"What am I to understand by that?"

"That he is, or may be, on occasion, slightly deaf."

Mrs. Musgrave started.

"Conveniently blind," proceeded the Don, significantly.

"Altogether unscrupulous; your tool! Is that it?"

"You put it harshly. He is a very good friend of mine."

"And to what use do you propose to put his friendship?" demanded the lady, desperately resolved to make her captor show his hand openly.

"To secure a legal claim to your duty, and trust to time to win—"

"But you can establish no legal claim by force."

"On the contrary, if at any time in the future you can be brought to acquiesce in a ceremony which at its solemnization you may have resisted to the utmost, you can give it all validity before the law."

"Which I will never do!"

"There is nothing so uncertain as a lady's will."

"In a case of such infamous—"

"If it be from infamy that you seek to protect yourself under the shield of a legal sanction."

Again the lady buried her face in the folds of her companion's dress, shivering with dread.

"You shall have time for consideration,"

said the Don, calmly. "You will ever find me the most reasonable of men. A day more or less, as a concession to your natural repugnance just at first to so unconventional a wooing, will not matter."

"Adios, senora! And remember that the boldest in love are wont to be the most tender."

He bowed himself out; and sinking into her attendant's arms, Mrs. Musgrave whispered:

"Dear Prue, if the worst comes, kill me!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DEED WITHOUT A NAME!

JIM CARSDALE dashed into the center of You Bet with but one thought seething madly in his brain—to procure a weapon with which to annihilate his wife and the man-lover—as he believed—who had come between him and his revenge.

A blaze of light directed him to a saloon where he had been drinking and gambling earlier in the evening; and leaping from his saddle and in through the open door almost at a bound, he shouted:

"A revolver! A weapon of any kind! Who will sell me a revolver, or give me the use of it until morning? Fix your own price, gents; only don't keep me waiting!"

His wild excitement as he brushed his way through the crowd was enough to show the exigency of the case. Everybody yielded before him, while those further away pressed forward to learn what had placed a man in such a strait for arms.

As he thus gained the middle of the room, his roving eye fastened upon a man who, standing at the bar, turned round to look at him.

In the drinker he recognized Captain Flood, his hatred of whom was even more deadly than that against Californy Kit.

Instantly his whole purpose changed.

Throwing out his arms so as to press back those who immediately surrounded him, he cried, keeping his eyes fixed upon his enemy:

"Hold on, gents! Stand back! Don't crowd the mourners! That thar's my man!"

Every eye at once adverted to the captain.

He preserved his listless attitude of lazy grace, regarding the excited intruder with the cool indifference of a man who accepted whatever the fickle waves of fortune brought to his feet, without troubling himself to question the whence or the whither.

Coolly he knocked the ashes off the end of his cigar, glancing down to see that it was done to his liking. Then he resumed his smoking, regarding Jim Carsdale calmly through the blue rings of smoke.

"Give me a weapon! Then open a line between us," demanded Jim, fiercely.

"He's got blood in his eye, an' no mistake," observed one of the bystanders, sarcastically.

"What's the row with you, pard?" asked another, not at all disturbed, apparently.

At this instant another figure rushed into the saloon.

A voice that awakened everybody's interest called out:

"Gentlemen! gentlemen! don't heed him! Don't give him any weapon just now!"

Every eye was turned in the direction of the door. At the further side of the crowd there was a general rising on tiptoe and craning of necks, and those who were so fortunate as to be near them leaped upon chairs, and even upon tables.

"Who is the jolly little dame?"

"My eye! ain't she a beauty?"

"What does she want?"

"Dry up, thar, an' let the lady speak!"

"Make way thar, gents! Don't stand like stocks in her track!"

"Jim! dear Jim!" she pleaded, making her way to him and fearlessly taking hold of his arm, "don't follow this thing up to-night. Come home, de!"

Without looking at her, but keeping his glittering eyes fixed upon Captain Flood, while he showed his teeth in a grimace of ferocious hate, Jim put her aside with a sweep of his arm, and flung these choice tokens of his regard at his enemy:

"Coward! Liar! Cheat! Scoundrel in every form of villainy! You dog! shooting is too good for you; you ought to have the lash!"

The auditors of this diatribe stared their

amazement. One man vented his feelings in a prolonged whistle. Another addressed Captain Flood:

"Waal, boss, 'pears like he was reachin' fur yel!"

Not a muscle in the captain's face changed, nor did it change a shade of color either way as he said:

"Can no gentleman present accommodate him? He is bound to have his amusement."

"Shall it be a shootin'-iron, or bull-whanger?" asked one of the bystanders, to the amusement of the rest.

Captain Flood merely turned his eyes, but could not detect the speaker from his grinning companions.

Still with his unchanging face, he said, dryly:

"If the facetious individual last up will show himself when I have disposed of the impatient fire-eater who claims to be famishing for blood and glory, I will guarantee to make him eat a yard of the best bull-whanger in the camp, in the most approved style of the art. If he has any friends or admirers of his wit who have the courage of their convictions, I can accommodate them also, one or two at a time. Don't all speak at once, gentlemen. First come, first served."

"I say, pards," suggested one of the crowd "take a fool's advice, an' don't go to bearin' down on this hyar stranger. He's playin' possum! You hyar me?"

"Give me a revolver!" persisted Jim.

"I don't know how you come to be without the necessaries o' life," said one of the men, "but I'm jest the galoot to put you up in shape, an' see that you have a fair shake, in the bargain."

And he drew forth his revolver and examined it to see that it was ready for instant and effective use.

But here the proprietor of the saloon interposed.

"Hold on, gents! I can't afford to have my shebang riddled fur your amoosement, an' this hyar new five hundred dollar lookin'-glass knocked to smithereens, like as not. Ef you want to run a slaughter-house, you go outside, you do!"

"That's the chalk! Let's run this thing reg'lar. We hain't had a squar' fight, all accordin' to Gunter, in so long, that it'll be a treat. Choose yer seconds, gents; an' we'll pace yer distance in the street."

This proposal met with general approval.

One man voiced the general sentiment.

"These hyar leetle diffikilties comes up so permiskis in You Bet, that half the crowd don't ginerally git no fair sight o' the thing before it's over with."

The seconds were quickly selected; and the crowd poured out into the street in high elation.

"I say, fellers!" cried an enthusiastic one. "We want to give every man, woman and child in this hyar camp a shake at this, without regard to race, complexion, or previous condition. Tom, you take the down track, an' I'll take the up, an' we'll rout out the very dead!"

"The dead-drunk!" amended Tom.

And, proceeding in opposite directions through the camp, they shouted at the top of their stentorian lungs:

"Oh, yes! oh, yes! o-o-oh, ye-e-es!"

This call was so well understood that from every saloon in the place issued pell-mell a stream of eager questioners.

The first question that arose was just how the fight was to be conducted.

The night was pitch-dark, except where the light streamed in a bar from the doorway or windows of some saloon.

The crowd had as much to say upon this subject as the seconds proper; and it was at once conceded that the only thing practicable was to stand the men each in one of these bars of light.

But if the positions were not carefully selected, one of the contestants might have his figure outlined against some illuminated surface, where a flood of light fell upon some shanty wall; while he in his turn would not have the advantage of seeing his man stand out in bold relief against such a background.

While this matter was under adjustment, Fancy Flo found her way to Captain Flood's side.

"Look here," she said, in a hoarse, unnatural voice, tapping him on the shoulder "I want a word with you."

"Who are you?" he asked, turning to look at her in the semi-gloom.

"You know me well enough," she replied. "And I know you. I didn't drop to you at first; but I've spotted you now; an' you'd better believe it'll stand you in hand to give me a word before you carry this thing any further."

"I wonder if the jade has recognized me at last?" thought the captain. "My make-ups have been so perfect as to blind everybody. It must be some unguarded cadence of my voice."

Captain Flood was a villain of lightning-like thought, and of a wonderful fertility of expedients. Whatever emergency was sprung upon him, he saw his way out of it before other men had time to rally from the shock.

"If she does know me, I can't afford to leave her tongue unbridled. Here goes for a silencer! I am obliged to her for giving me the opportunity."

Aloud he said, quietly:

"I never refuse an interview to a lady. I am at your service."

"Step this way, then."

He followed her without demur.

As she led him out of the crowd, the men stared after them open-mouthed.

When they had disappeared in the darkness, significant glances were exchanged by those who had been left behind, and a general grin passed from lip to lip.

"Waal," said one of the men, "that thar's as good a pointer as I want."

"A blind man 'ud see through it," said another.

"What is it, Sam?" asked a third.

"Why, you leather-head!" cried Sam. "don't you see that that's what the racket's all about?"

"The leetle woman?"

"To be sure."

"That was plain from the start. I thought, by your blather, that you had somethin' new."

"Waal, she's lookin' out fur the one she thinks the most of, anyways."

"She'd be a fool ef she didn't!"

This discussion branched off into bets of all sorts.

Meanwhile, the subjects of it had retreated behind a neighboring shanty, where they stood in darkness so dense that they could but dimly make out each other's forms, and quite out of reach of curious ears.

"And now," said the captain, "to begin with, who do you think I am?"

"I don't think anything about it," replied Flo, positively. "I know that you and the pretended Don Raviero are one and the same."

"Correct!" admitted Captain Flood, without hesitation. "Well, what do you propose to do about it?"

"I call this thing off."

"Hwell!" laughed the captain, "if you weren't a woman, I should call that by its proper name—cheeky."

"Nevertheless, I shall stand by it."

"You seem confident of your ability to enforce your commands."

"I am so."

"But what pressure can you bring to bear upon me?"

"If you refuse, I will betray you."

"My identity with Don Raviero?"

"The whole thing. Your scheme—and, alas! my complicity with you—to effect the ruin of my poor Jim!"

"And be laughed at for your pains! Why, woman! if the fellows about here were guilty of nothing worse than such tricks as that, their emigration would not have been such a benefit to their respective Eastern homes. All's fair in love and war, you know; and the men of Canvas City, finding themselves so much in pocket, will not be disposed to quarrel with the man who profited them, even if his ways were a little irregular."

"Mrs. Musgrave will take quite a different view of the matter, I am persuaded."

That cool retort struck home.

Captain Flood bit his lip, and paused for a reply.

"You are very clever at kicking up a dust," said Flo; "but you ought not to have expected that any of it would lodge in my eyes."

"It seems not," said Flood, shortly. "Well, you have me there. You see I am quite

frank with you. But you must still listen to reason. There's no way out of this thing, even if I were willing. I've got to meet him. He himself would be the last one to let me off. And if you imagine that I am going to cry small before him—"

"You will have nothing to do with him."

"How then?"

"There is the way open before you."

"What! run away?"

"You may run, or walk."

At this cool response Captain Flood uttered an impatient oath.

"So this bold fellow has you so that he can bluster openly, while in reality screening himself behind your petticoats!"

"You know better than that. He's a better man than you, any day."

"Then why are you interfering to protect him?"

"He ain't himself to night, and you know it. You're a dead shot; and he couldn't hit the side of a house, in liquor as he is, and maddened by what he has passed through."

"That's his lookout. Isn't he the aggressor?"

"Bah! You know that there is nothing in that. You're proposing to murder him in cold blood. Did you think I would stand by and see it done?"

If it had been light she would have seen nothing unusual in the captain's face at this juncture; for he would have dissembled his feelings, as he knew so well how to do. But, being dark, so that he needed no artificial concealment, if she had had the power to penetrate the darkness, she would have seen that in his eyes which would have turned her blood to ice, and caused her to leap away from him with a cry of alarm.

As it was, she saw nothing. She had no warning of what was coming.

"Look here, Flo," he said, as if going off on another tack, "there's no use in talking about this. It can't be done. I've paid you well; but I can and will stand more. Here is five hundred dollars, which I kept back out of the pile I gave to the committee. I'll go you five hundred better in the morning, and we'll drop this foolishness."

He put his hand into his pocket, and extended it toward her. She could just distinguish this movement in the darkness. It was all so natural that it thoroughly diverted her mind from any suspicion of his real purpose.

"What!" she cried, in horror and disgust, sell his heart's blood to you for your paltry gold?—the very money that you robbed him of!"

And she stepped back, flinging her hands behind her.

"Nonsense!" he said, stepping toward her.

And then, like a flash, he made a bound, and clutched her by the throat.

She did not realize her danger until it was too late. She strove to scream for help, but only a hoarse, rasping sound of escaping breath issued from her throat.

With the impetus of his rush she fell backward to the ground with stunning force; and he came down upon her with the full weight of his body.

In but a moment more Captain Flood, sheathing a bloody blade, returned complacently to his waiting second.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN OATH OF VENGEANCE.

"ARE you ready?" he asked his second, in a quiet tone, as he returned.

"Yes," was the reply. "You air to stand jest hyar."

And a spot was indicated where the light streaming from the door of a saloon would fall full upon him.

"He's as cool as a cucumber," observed one of the men, admiringly.

"He'd orter be," replied another, laughingly. "He's fixed things with the leetle woman!"

This comment reached Captain Flood's ear; but he did not betray that he heard it by the slightest change in the expression of his cold, immobile face.

He was looking steadily at Jim Carsdale, who stood at a distance of some twelve or fourteen paces in a similar illumination.

The latter repaid his look with a glare of savage hatred. He moved restlessly, and his features worked as if he with difficulty re-

strained the impulse to break out in open oburgation.

"Look a-hyar, my fine feller!" expostulated his second, "we'll have to pack ye in ice a spell, ef ye carry on like this hyar. What do you want fur to do? Do you want to git the top o' your head blowed off, an' not git nary a smell at yonder galoot? He's as cool as a Texas norther, an' you're jest a-b'ilin' fur all ye're worth."

"He'll be cooler than that before I'm through with him!" muttered Jim, with a savage oath.

"That's all right, boss. But if you don't simmer down a bit, you won't hit the side of a house."

This was his last caution, as he stepped back.

Then came the final instructions of Captain Flood's second, in the cold, measured tones of a soldier:

"Gentlemen, you will stand with your backs to each other until the command to fire is given. You will then turn, and fire at your discretion while three are being counted, at intervals as near the following as can be marked off—one! two! three! If either shall turn before the word of command, or shall fire after the word *three* has been pronounced, he will be shot in his tracks by his own and his adversary's second."

Midway between the duelists, a little out of the line of fire on either side, their respective seconds stood in the darkness, with drawn revolvers hanging at their sides, ready to carry out this retribution, if the conditions of the "code" were violated.

The crowd lined the street on either side, absorbed in the formalities so unusually marked.

"You will now take your positions."

The duelists both turned in their tracks, so as to stand back to back, with their weapons hanging at their sides.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

"Ready!" came the reply from both in concert.

"Fire! One! two!—"

Crack! Crack!

They had wheeled and fired not quite together.

Jim Carsdale threw his hands up, flinging his revolver over his head. He took a step forward, reeled, turned half round, and fell heavily to the ground.

Captain Flood stood as motionless as a rock for an instant, then thrust his revolver into its holster, and coolly awaited the further direction of his second.

"Gentlemen," asked that individual, "has the code been carried out without infringement?"

"To the letter," replied Jim Carsdale's second.

"You are satisfied with the result?"

"As far as your conduct of the affair is concerned."

"We regret the disaster to your principal."

"You are exonerated from all blame."

"Good-evening, sir!"

"Good-evening, gentlemen!"

And the formalities were over.

Captain Flood's second walked rapidly to his side.

"You were not hit?"

"Not a scratch."

"I congratulate you. To be frank, I had no great fears. Let us retire."

But the successful duelist was besieged by the crowd, who admired his nerve. He thanked them for their good wishes, and invited them to drink with him.

"And now, gentlemen," he said, when this inevitable Western ceremony was over, "if you will excuse me, my business calling me elsewhere, I will bid you good-night."

As he stood with his foot in the stirrup, his second came up to him, and said:

"Pard, you fetched him in the head."

"Thank you!" said Captain Flood.

And swinging into the saddle, he trotted away into the night, going in the direction opposite that to Canvas City.

But when he was well away, he spurred his animal into a sweeping gallop, and making a great *detour*, bore away toward his real destination.

Meanwhile, the captain's second had not got his information "straight," but had taken it in from the current report of the street.

It was true that Jim had been shot in the

head; but the implication that he had been shot *through* the head was not warranted by the facts.

He was borne unconscious into the nearest saloon; and there the first cursory examination, by one who made no pretensions to surgical knowledge, revealed the fact that his opponent's bullet had ranged along the side of his head, making an ugly-looking furrow in his scalp, and probably leaving a fractured skull beneath.

But a little later, on the arrival of a "saw-bones" who had three or four neighboring camps in his circuit of practice, he was pronounced not seriously hurt; and within half an hour was on his feet, though under medical injunction to go to bed and secure at least forty-eight hours of uninterrupted quiet.

But an unexpected event precluded this.

Some men, in passing, had their attention attracted to the spot where Captain Flood had parted with Fancy Flo, by a low moan issuing from the darkness.

Jim's first demand had been for Fancy Flo. It was whispered about, by those who had seen her solicitation of an interview with Captain Flood, that she was now probably miles away with "the better-lookin' feller."

What was the astonishment and indignation of these fellows, so careless where a love adventure, which left the man who had the most legitimate claim in the lurch, was concerned, to see the beautiful unfortunate borne into the presence of her lover with the purple marks of a villain's murderous clutch on her throat, and the life-blood welling from gaping wounds in her bosom!

For a moment Jim stood staring, white and horror-struck. Then with a great cry of fear and anguish he cast himself down beside her clasping her in his arms, and appealing to her to open her eyes and speak to him.

As if his love had power to call her back from the grave, the drooping lids fluttered open, and she gazed into his eyes.

"Jim, my darling!" she murmured, making a vain essay to put her arms about his neck.

"Who has done this?" he cried, struggling to restrain the great sobs that rose in his throat and forced the hot tears from his eyes.

"He—the pretended Spaniard, Don Raviero; Captain Flood; Don Diablo. They are all the same. He has as many disguises—"

But a twinge of pain drove the blood still more completely from her white lips, and checked the flow of words.

The listening men murmured ejaculations of wonder at her revelations.

Jim Carsdale ground an oath of deadly vengeance between his teeth.

"Put my arm about your neck, Jim," she whispered. "I want to go so! Oh, Jim! I—I—loved you so! I'm afraid to go without you, Jim! Hold me close!"

He effected her wish, kissing her, while hot tears fell upon her face.

She opened her eyes and smiled faintly.

"You love me; don't you?" she said.

Then there came a sudden look of fright. Her eyes opened wider, and she gazed into his with a look of lingering dread.

"Jim," she said, "I can't die this way! I want you to promise me something."

"Anything! anything!" he replied, brokenly.

"Would you still love me, if you found out that I had done something—something dreadful—if—if I had—had—"

She could not proceed. The dread deepened in her eyes.

"Oh, this is my punishment!" she sobbed.

"Don't! don't!" pleaded her lover. "I will love you through everything—anything!"

"Even if I had—I had— Remember— Oh, if I can make you believe this!"

"I do believe it. Flo, before you say what it is."

"Kiss me! Hold me close to you! So! You may never be willing to do it again!"

"My poor darling! don't distress yourself and me like this!"

"Remember, when I went into the thing, I did not love you then. It seems so strange, as if I had not loved you all my life! I think I must have done so, long before I knew who it was to be—through all the vague dreams of my girlhood."

She seemed to be wandering. A peaceful smile settled down upon her face.

Dreading to dispel this, yet longing to know what was on her mind, Jim recalled her to what she had to reveal.

The smile faded; the look of dread came back.

"I did not know that I loved you; I did not know that you had ever given me a second thought, or ever would. It was bad enough at best; but always remember that. When I found out that I did love you, and that you loved me, I ran away from you. I couldn't endure to have a hand in it. Oh, Jim! don't forget that I went away; and you yourself saw how it wrung my heart!"

"Well, he swore to me that she was unworthy of you; that she had betrayed you as only a woman can; that he only sought to separate you; and that no other harm should come to you! Then—I loved you so—it was so hard to give you up—and I knew that I should never betray you again—never do a thing that the most loyal wife might not do, nor have a thought but for your happiness—and, oh, I did not know that it would be so terrible—that he was going to do it in that way—"

"What?—do what?" cried Jim.

She was clinging to him convulsively, trembling like a leaf in the wind, and speaking so rapidly and so disjointedly, that his thoughts were in a whirl of confusion.

"It was all a trick—his pretending to find the cards under your vest. He did it by sleight of hand!"

She turned her eyes for a moment to the faces of the wondering men who bent over to catch every word that fell from her lips, and addressed them.

"I want all of you who hear me to go to Canvas City, and tell every one there that the pretense that Jim Carsdale cheated at cards was a plot from beginning to end. A lot of men who were in Flood's pay lost money to Jim on purpose—money that he supplied them with—so that when he sprung his trap upon him it would look as if he had been cheating all along. He wanted to separate Jim from his wife, that he had made love to in New Orleans; and I—I—"

Her eyes went back to Jim's face.

"I was to help by making your wife jealous. Remember what you told me, when I asked you, after we had passed her at the door of the hotel. If I had believed that she was true to you, and that she would one day make you happy, nothing in the world would have induced me to stand in your way! He might have wrung my life out of me, and I would not have been a party to your betrayal. It was because I loved you so—because— Oh, Jim, can you *ever* forgive me?"

He held her mechanically in his arms yet. There was a blank look in his face, as he realized the part she had played. *Would he forgive her?*

"If you can't—if you can't," she gasped. "don't take your arms away for a minute! It won't be long! I sha'n't live—"

But he saw the whole situation—all the motives that had waged such terrible battle in her breast; and the old look—the look for which her soul hungered and thirsted came back into his eyes, as, clasping her tenderly, he bowed his face upon hers, and, murmuring:

"My darling—my poor darling!"

He pressed his lips to hers in a kiss of unalloyed endearment.

"Jim! Jim!" she cried, in thrilling tones of ecstasy.

A strength which summed up all the energies of her waning life was concentrated into one moment of delirious transport.

She clasped him close, and kissed him twice in rapid succession on the lips.

She threw her head back, so as to gaze into his eyes, her face irradiated, her eyes humid with a tenderness beyond expression.

A moment so; then, with a rippling murmur, she pressed her lips to his again, in a long, clinging caress, which ended in a sigh, as all the muscles relaxed, and she sunk back, dead!

For a moment her bereaved lover gazed at her as if turned to stone. Then his very soul was shaken by a storm of rage.

Kneeling beside her body, he pressed his left hand on his heart, and lifted his right to Heaven.

"Hear me swear," he said, in low, husky tones, "never to eat or sleep until I have

wiped out this foul crime in the life-blood of the murderer!"

"Amen! Amen!" rose in a burst of sympathetic feeling from a score of throats around.

"Gentlemen, will you join me in this?"

"Ay! ay! to a man! The coward who does not join in this righteous man-hunt will be kicked out of You Bet by every man in it!"

Inside of an hour the camp was deserted by all save a corporal's guard, who had been detailed to protect the property of the rest during their absence.

Jim Carsdale rode at their head.

CHAPTER XXIX.

RESCUED, BUT—

ON the morning of the day following the announcement of his amatory designs, Don Diablo presented himself before Mrs. Musgrave, looking—she thought—secretly agitated.

"Senora," he said, with his affectation of formal Spanish politeness, "I have the honor to once more stand in your presence."

And he bowed low, with a gallant sweep of his sombrero.

The lady began to tremble in every nerve; yet she replied with dignity:

"Candor compels me to say that I do not hail you with any pleasure."

"And yet I am here for a decision on what is esteemed the tenderest question of life."

"A truce to this farce, sir!"

"You will at least appreciate the practical bearing of my real motive for pressing your inclinations. I must soon report with my search party. It is imperative that I report a success. To do that, I must carry you back as my wife, if you are acquiescent; if not, I must at least send back by my men the evidence of my marriage, with such an account of the whole affair as will prevent further pursuit."

Mrs. Musgrave caught her breath. No sooner was she out of one snare than she fell into another. Who could have forecast anything so terrible as that? What power could save her from the designs of this conscienceless Spaniard?

Still she answered him shortly:

"I cannot imagine what sort of a nature you conceive me to have, to be willing to dispose of myself in any such unnatural fashion as this."

"That of a common-sense woman of the world," replied Don Diablo, coolly, "who, seeing the inevitable, is disposed to make the best of such alternatives as are presented."

"If it be inevitable, as you say," answered the lady, her voice beginning to falter, in spite of her, "I can conceive of nothing more degraded than to prefer that which you suggest. I loathe you, and always shall! Under whatever pressure of circumstances, I could no more yield myself to such companionship as yours, than I could voluntarily take the most loathsome snake into my bosom!"

Her auditor winced and bit his lip. Even in his assumed character of Don Diablo it chagrined him beyond expression to be told that he was so repugnant to her.

While he was casting about for a reply, there came the sound of a pistol-shot.

Don Diablo started, and turned his head in the attitude of listening.

Another shot; then a rattling fire.

Then came the clatter of rapidly approaching hoofs.

Don Diablo stepped out of the wickiup, to meet a horseman who was coming at a breakneck pace, with every manifestation of intense excitement.

"It is friends!" cried Mrs. Musgrave, throwing her arms about her companion, and bursting into hysterical tears.

A hurried conference passed between Don Diablo and the rider; when the former leaped upon his horse, and dashed away in the direction whence the other had come.

Meanwhile, the sounds of an attack increased.

The women hung breathlessly in each other's arms, trying to assure themselves that the conflict was drawing near, which would indicate that the assailing party were pressing the outlaws before them.

Don Diablo had scarcely disappeared from sight, when a great shout arose, borne

faintly to the strained ears of the anxious women.

Then followed a furious interchange of shots.

Mrs. Musgrave became so excited that she would have rushed out of the wickiup, to meet the rescuers half-way; but a silent guard, masked and inscrutable, caused her to recoil in despair.

Half an hour of racking suspense followed, the silence every now and then broken by the sounds of guerrilla warfare.

Then came a masked rider, who, after a word with the guard which set him to bestirring himself, appeared before the captives.

"Beg pardon, mum," he said; "but we hain't got no time fur no palaver. The Cap says git; an' git it is—an' mighty lively, too."

"You intend to take us away from here?" cried Mrs. Musgrave, excitedly.

"You bet!" was the laconic reply. "The hosses will be hyar in a jiffy. Ef you've got any traps that you want to stay by ye, you'd better tie 'em on. We're goin' clean through—"

Sligo did not express himself literally; but the idea was that they were to stop for nothing.

Mrs. Musgrave's breath was fluttering; her eyes were as bright as diamonds.

"Why have you come for us in this great hurry?" she asked.

"You'll have plenty of time to talk that over with the Cap when he chips in ag'in," said the outlaw, rapidly uncoiling a rope from his waist. "I ain't much on the chin myself; an' besides, it's business jest now."

"Your party has been attacked!" cried the lady. "Friends have come to rescue us! You are being worsted! You have been ordered to carry us away while your master holds our friends in check!"

"You're mighty keen, mum; but you'll have to wait until our next issue, to see whether your answers to them conundrums is O. K."

"We refuse to go with you!" said the lady, with quiet decision.

"Waal, now ye're talkin' biz!" replied Sligo, with evident relish. "I kin play to that lead like a book!"

"Prue!" cried Mrs. Musgrave, "we must delay him somehow till our friends can reach us!"

She looked about as if for some place of retreat—some barrier behind which she could make a stand against the enemy.

There was no such defense in the wickiup; and the cool ruffian commanded the doorway.

The terrible issue of the moment wrought this gentle woman out of her natural character. She felt that she would be equal to a hand-to-hand encounter with her captor, if it came to that.

But there was not a trace of a weapon of any kind. Even the brush of which the wickiup was constructed would not furnish a cudgel large enough to be effective in the hands of a slugging policeman in full practice.

Miss Prouter, who appeared perfectly self-possessed, yet intensely vigilant, so that not a fact escaped her keen eyes, made no reply; but she saw the hopelessness of the case.

The guard came round with the horses.

"Bob!" called Sligo.

"On deck!" responded Bob, as he stepped into the wickiup.

"Now, mum," said Sligo, "how'll ye have it?"

His manner was too significant to leave any interpretation of his words necessary.

"It's no use," said Prue, quietly, to her mistress.

"Thar's whar *your* head's level!" was Bob's approval.

Mrs. Musgrave burst into tears.

"Oh, something *must* be done!" she cried.

"You bet!—and at once, ef not sooner!"

And, striding forward, Sligo seized her by the wrist.

Before she had time to realize what he was about to do, he slipped a running noose upon her wrist, whirled it behind her back, and cast a turn round the other wrist, binding the two together.

In sudden fierce desperation she writhed to escape him.

He caught her off her feet in a twinkling.

That, and her helplessness as compared with his strength, brought her to her senses.

"Set me down," she said, brokenly. "I will not resist you."

"That suits me to death!" said the fellow, at once taking her at her word.

Miss Prouter crossed her hands behind her back, not waiting for Bob to "make a demonstration."

"You're knowledgeable, marm," he said, with a grin.

"I've seen brutes like you before!" was her significant retort.

"I've seen cats as sly as *you*, my dear!" he answered. "I hain't a-givin' of you no rope because you're well-behaved, *you bet!*"

And he laughed.

His estimate was correct. She yielded because the time for action had not yet arrived. When it came—if it ever did—he would have to look out for her.

The women were mounted on their respective horses, and bound to the saddle.

Then, taking the leading-lines in hand, the masked outlaws rode off at as brisk a pace as the nature of the ground would permit.

All this while, an occasional pistol-shot showed that an obstinate struggle was still in progress.

Mrs. Musgrave dropped her head upon her breast in despair.

Who was her rescuer? She thought of but one. Was it her fault that she recalled that mad dash between the flying coach and the brink of the precipice?

Her heart beat wildly, and a crimson spot flamed hotly in either cheek, at the riotous surge of feeling which the mere thought of Californy Kit conjured up.

She was lost in a maze of conflicting emotions, when they emerged into a mountain road, and her captors lashed their horses into a run.

Then she saw that they were excited—that they were straining every nerve.

A moment later she heard a shout in their rear.

Sligo looked backed over his shoulder, and uttered an oath.

Bob followed his example, and said:

"Kono!"

"Not by a long shot!" replied Sligo, doggedly.

"It's that tenderfoot sharp from the States!"

"Waal, he's got to play his hand fur all it's worth before he takes my chips!"

And he lashed his led horse more savagely.

Mrs. Musgrave's heart rose in her throat. She longed to turn round; but, sitting without the use of her hands, it was all that she could do to preserve her balance, at that headlong speed, and over such rough ground.

But help was at hand! *He* was coming! Her heart began to dance to the clang of her horse's flying hoofs.

How godlike he must look! She pictured his frown and blazing eyes.

Then came a shot from the rear. He must be gaining!

Sligo and Bob turned in their saddles. The latter drew a revolver, and fired.

The woman's heart quailed! The rich blood fled her cheeks and lips. A fatal shot might end all!

And now began a running fight, all the more terrible that the possibility of seeing but one side of it left her in agonizing suspense, every time one of the outlaws fired.

But ever came the reassuring shout, and the return shot, drawing momentarily nearer and nearer.

"Ha!" cried Sligo, suddenly, after one of his shots, "I fetched him!"

Then the heart of the listener seemed like to burst.

But Bob said:

"Pinked his hoss. That's no go."

And he fired his own weapon.

"Keep close to the women-folks," said Sligo, suiting the action to the word. "They're afraid to line us, an' take the resk o' saltin' the wrong bacon."

"Pard," said Bob, "this hyar ain't comfortable, no way ye kin fix it! It's their long legs as is goin' fur to flummix us, an' no mistake."

"Air you a-weakenin'?"

"Waal, to tell ye the God's truth, I'm git-

fin' a mite watery about the stumick region. I've hearn tell o' long pork in my time, an' cold pig, an' sich."

"You stand to yer knittin'. Ef we kin fotch that head devil, we're solid. I'm speakin' fur a few more cracks at him before I begin to cry small."

And once more he fired his revolver. But he followed the shot with an oath, as if disappointed with the result.

Several more shots were exchanged, the pursuers drawing steadily nearer, when suddenly Miss Prouter's hands came round to the front.

She had been silently working to free herself, while her guard was absorbed in the more exciting struggle.

She now seized the rein which lay on her horse's neck, and throwing all her strength into the effort, drew him in, crying:

"Whoa!"

Although she did not bring him upon his haunches, she checked his pace so materially that Bob shot ahead and lost his hold on the leading-line.

"Hello! the blasted cat has shook me," he cried. "Waal, that let's me out! Hyar goes fur—every man fur himself an' the devil take the hindmost!"

And giving himself up wholly to the business of flight, he forced his animal ahead of the others.

Sligo swore roundly. The pursuers yelled their triumph.

Mrs. Musgrave did not know how her companion had effected her escape; but she began to feel that her captors were being worsted, and that her own rescue was but a matter of a few minutes.

What was her dismay when, a little further on, Sligo shouted to his companion:

"Take the cut-off! I'll shunt 'em down the main road after this beauty!"

And when he reached the point where Bob had diverged from the road, plunging into a bridle-path, he struck her horse a parting blow and yelled so as to frighten him into a runaway pace down the road, while he followed his comrade.

The terrified lady heard a yell of rage on the part of her friends, which died away in a groan of dismay, as she was thus sent adrift.

But then came the thunder of flying hoofs in ever-nearing pursuit, until a horse's head, with blazing eyes and distended nostrils, drew alongside of her, and she knew that she was safe.

She turned, to reward his rider with a look the significance of which could not be put into words and gazed into the eyes of—

Captain Flood!

CHAPTER XXX.

A MYSTERIOUS WARNING.

A BLOOD-STAINED handkerchief was bound about Captain Flood's head, and there were traces of blood on his cheek, as if from a wound near the temple.

His clothes were soiled with clay, torn and in general disarray, as if from bushwhacking.

"Thank God!" he ejaculated, as he reached forward and secured the dangling leading line of Mrs. Musgrave's horse. "Madeline, I never before passed such hours! I feared that that villain would do you some irreparable injury."

"I will release you, but we cannot stop. We outflanked him, and have balked his scheme to run you off; but he and his rascals are at our very heels. You have done so bravely, bear up a little longer. The worst is over. You are safe."

With his bowie he cut the rope that bound her wrists, and gave the reins into her hands, all without checking the speed of her horse.

He then turned in his saddle, and shouted to his fellows, urging them to press on.

Mrs. Musgrave glanced over her shoulder, and saw Prudence Prouter following in the midst of a group of men.

"We were too hotly pressed to think of pursuing the fellows who had you in charge, though I longed to get at the ruffian who cut you loose on a runaway horse!" continued the captain.

Mrs. Musgrave was so chagrined at finding this man instead of the one she had looked for at her side, that she remained dumb until directly interrogated.

"You are not hurt?" he asked, gazing into her face with respectful solicitude.

"No—no."

"And have been offered no indignity? I will cut that villain's heart out, if he has dared—"

"I have suffered nothing save captivity."

"What was his purpose? A ransom? He seems to have assumed the role of a regular brigand."

"I followed you to Canvas City, but at such a distance that I knew nothing of what had happened until I reached there. I at once headed one of the rescuing parties, of which there were several, and was so fortunate as to succeed in trailing you to the outlaws' retreat."

"We were not strong enough to carry the place by storm, and but for a maneuver by which we got in the rear of the enemy, and discovered that you were being run off, we might yet be playing at hide-and-seek in the pass."

"If we can get by a point a little further up the road before the Spaniard's men reach it by a cut-off, we shall have an open road to Slabtown; but if they succeed in intercepting us, we shall be forced to run to cover, and stand a siege in our turn. However, I do not fear the result."

All this was said in the most natural way; so that the lady did not dream that it was but part of a plot in which the same person enacted the role of captor and rescuer.

It was Captain Flood's—Don Diablo's—last card. If he did not retrieve his position in her confidence through her gratitude—Well, the future was a blank, but a very black and ominous blank, in that event!

"How did the news of our capture reach Canvas City?" asked Mrs. Musgrave.

Of course this was her woman's indirect way of asking what had become of Californy Kit; and considering that she had thus far spoken only under solicitation, it was not particularly relished by her rescuer.

"We were indebted to your escort out of You Bet for the information," he replied, a trifle shortly. "He claims, I believe, that he was overpowered by numbers, and thought it wiser to desert you, and hurry on for assistance, than to stand his ground and defend you."

"He was so overpowered," said Mrs. Musgrave, with a quiet decision that made the captain bite his lip.

"There are men in Canvas City who might have decided differently," he replied.

"I concur in his judgment," said the lady, for all the world as if it were a mere question of generalship.

But the captain's insinuated disparagement piqued her into coming out more boldly than she otherwise might have done.

"Was Mr. Kittridge hurt?" she asked.

"Hurt?" repeated the jealous rival. "Oh, no! He seems to have been too prudent to incur any particular danger."

"Your assurance relieves me of considerable anxiety," said Mrs. Musgrave, with provoking frankness. "Meanwhile, I have not expressed my indebtedness to you for the peril you have encountered in my behalf. You appear to be wounded."

"A trifle!" said the captain. "Pray, do not mention it."

Secretly Mrs. Musgrave experienced a twinge at the thought that Californy Kit had abandoned her to unknown enemies without striking a single blow, whatever the wisdom of such a course. But she would have bitten her tongue cut before permitting Captain Flood the satisfaction of knowing that he had made even so much of a point.

She tried to persuade herself that it did not hurt her; but she was disappointed, nevertheless. A woman is charmed with the generous devotion of a lover who fights in her defense, unwisely, it may be, but to the death, rather than with the cold foresight of one who stops to calculate the wiser course.

The rapidity of their riding, and the anxiety of the moment, were sufficient excuse for discontinuing conversation; and after looking ahead with seeming vigilance for some time, Captain Flood suddenly cried:

"We are too late! They have got in ahead of us!"

Mrs. Musgrave saw several men dash into the road at a considerable distance ahead. Of course they were some of Flood's own men, in his character of Don Diablo.

Their yell of triumph was responded to by those who seemed to be in pursuit of the rescuers.

"They have got us between two fires!" said the captain. "But, courage!—we are not captured yet!"

Turning to his immediate followers, he shouted:

"Follow me!"

And a little further up the road he dashed into a gulch that came down to the road at right angles.

With yells of disappointment the seeming enemies closed in from either direction; and there followed a belter-skelter scramble among rocks that threatened broken limbs at every bound, and through underbrush that lashed the face of the rider like a stinging scourge.

"Here we make our stand!" said the captain, when they had finally reached a little pocket shut in on all sides by circumvallating peaks. "Crocker, you take the ladies a little further back; and we will defend this pass to the last man!"

Mrs. Musgrave and her companion were hurried to a place of security, where they waited, anxiously listening to the renewed sounds of conflict, their guide leaving them as soon as he had told them where to stay.

Mrs. Musgrave was wrought to a high state of nervous tension. A vivid color burned in either cheek, and her eyes glowed with an unnatural brilliancy. She clung to her companion, shivering and sobbing hysterically.

Prue was pale, but dogged. The Prouter blood had some of the qualities which have made the Government mule proverbial.

After a skirmish as brief as it was brisk, the pistol-shots abruptly ceased, to be succeeded by dead silence.

Then followed what seemed an age of unbroken suspense, when Captain Flood presented himself, accompanied by several of his men.

"We shall have to pass the night here," he said. "During the darkness I will try to get a man off to fetch help, to raise the siege. Meanwhile, we will make you as comfortable as possible."

Under his orders the men set to work to construct a brush wickiup.

They were provided with food, all of the rescuing parties, the captain said, having been provisioned for three days.

During the remainder of the day Captain Flood played the considerate and deferential gentleman to perfection. Nothing that could contribute to Mrs. Musgrave's comfort was overlooked.

When the night fell, the women were left in their wickiup, with the assurance that they might seek much-needed sleep, knowing that they were surrounded by vigilant protectors.

Mrs. Musgrave, overpowered with exhaustion, yet burning with fever, sunk into a troubled stupor, from which she started from time to time out of a terrifying dream.

It may have been near midnight when there came a stealthy sound, as of some one cautiously disturbing the brush which protected the women from the chill and damp night wind that swept down the mountain.

Miss Prouter was sleeping, and did not hear it. Mrs. Musgrave, tossing and muttering in her sleep, was not roused by it.

Carefully twig by twig was removed, until a hole was made large enough to admit a man's body.

Then some one without began to worm his way through, with a wriggling motion.

At this juncture, Mrs. Musgrave, who happened to be lying on her side, with her face in this direction, opened her eyes wide.

A rude doorway had been left in the wickiup, before which a rubber poncho had been hung. This had blown down, leaving the entrance open.

At the moment at which we have arrived in our narrative, the moon came from behind a cloud, and casting a spot of light just at the threshold, illuminated the interior sufficiently so that things within could be dimly distinguished.

By this faint light Mrs. Musgrave was enabled to make out a white face, with what to her excited fancy seemed wildly-glaring eyes fixed upon her.

She gazed at it in fascinating horror. It looked as if a head, severed from its body,

had been set there on the ground, against the wall of the wickiup, opposite the doorway.

The body of the intruder, outside, lay in the dense shadow cast by the brush, so that she could not see it.

Unable to take her eyes from this blood-curdling spectacle, she reached out her hand to wake her companion.

Her movement caused the head to utter a guarded:

"Hush!"

Then the spell was broken; and with a shriek of terror the frightened woman cast herself into the arms of her sleeping companion, hiding her face in the spinster's bosom.

Roused from sleep in a way that would have tested the nerve of almost any one, Miss Prue did not lose her self-possession. The Prouters never "flew off the handle."

She heard a voice say, in an anxious whisper:

"Hold on, miss! Don't ye give it away! I'm yer solid friend! Californy Kit backs me fur all he's worth!"

The voice drew her attention to the face, and she realized that it was the face of some one there by stealth.

But, whoever it was, he announced himself as a friend, and said that he came with credentials from Californy Kit.

That name caught her ear, and reassured her. However unacceptable as an admirer of her mistress, she felt that Californy Kit was a man who could be relied upon. She could not say the same of Captain Flood.

"Hush!" she said, soothingly. "It is some one from Californy Kit."

And lo! Mrs. Musgrave suddenly became as still as a mouse!

A hurried step was heard approaching.

"Stand him off, miss! He'll swaller me, ef he drops onto me!"

And instantly the head was drawn back out of sight.

"Is anything amiss in the wickiup?" asked the voice of Captain Flood, as he stopped at a respectful distance.

Miss Prue thought rapidly. Whoever the stranger was, if it proved that he was there with any evil design, she could summon help before he could do any harm.

"Who has been tryin' to git in here?" she asked.

"Oh, Prue!" whispered Mrs. Musgrave, quickly clapping her hand over the mouth of her companion.

"You jest leave me to run this thing," whispered Miss Prue, in return.

"Trying to get in there?" repeated Captain Flood. "Why, no one. There is no one here to disturb you. You are only nervous."

"Who took the poncho from before the door?" asked Prue.

"Oh, is that it? You need have no fears. I see that it has blown down. I will replace it for you."

"That may be all right, mister; an' then ag'in it may be all wrong," said Prue, with deliberate skepticism. "We went to sleep with that thing shut; an' we waked up to find it open."

"But the wind has blown the poncho from its fastenings," insisted the captain.

"You said that before," replied Prue.

"But if you'd jest as lief stand where you be for a spell, till I look about, before we're shut up here in the dark ag'in, I'll be much obleeged to ye."

"With pleasure," said the captain.

"Satisfy yourself, my good woman."

"And be assured, Madeline," he went on, addressing Mrs. Musgrave, "that there are wakeful eyes about sufficient to protect you from any surprise."

The fact was that two of his men—one of his immediate followers, and one of those who had pretended to pursue him as Don Diablo's men—were on guard to prevent the remote possibility of a surprise by honest men; while he was kept wakeful brooding over the difficulties in the way of the accomplishment of his purpose. All the rest were sleeping the sleep of the just.

Miss Prouter moved about, as if looking for a man.

Presently she declared herself satisfied that their alarm was without cause, but said that she would replace the poncho, which she did.

Captain Flood moved away.

Prue had fixed the poncho so that she could see the face when it reappeared, as it presently did.

"Jest you stay where you be, mister, whoever you air," she said, "an' we'll hearken to what you've got to say."

"That's all right, miss. Only we've got to run the thing on the quiet. The Don ain't a mile away, an' don't ye furgit it!"

"Who air you; an' what do ye want?"

"I'm Luny, I am. Everybody in Slabtown knows me fur a good one. They 'low as I'm light in the upper story; but I drops to a thing or two, once in a while, what nobody else hain't spotted. I'm onto a thing o' that kind jest now. It's a leetle dodge o' Don Diablo's."

"What's that to us?"

"A heap, I reckon! Maybe you don't know, now, who the Don is?"

"No, I don't. Do you?"

"I should smile! I've got his trade-mark on my knowledge-box!"

And Luny grinned, as if this were a good joke.

Miss Prue by this time began to feel that nothing was to be apprehended from the owner of the face so strangely obtruded upon them.

Mrs. Musgrave, too, had mustered up courage to look, and remembered having seen the face in Slabtown.

"Ask him about Mr. Kittridge," she whispered to Prue.

"Kit?" asked Luny, taking the word from her mouth. "I'll tell ye all about him in a minute. But, say! Air you a-cottonin' to this hyar snoozer, my gay an' festive captin'?"

"Not if we know ourselves!" replied Miss Prue, with emphasis.

"That's you!" answered Luny. "Now, thar's Kit—he's true blue, with a silk cracker. You kin tie to Kit. But keep yer weather eye peeled fur the bold captin'. He don't never deal from the top o' the pack—he don't; an' the devil himself can't tell when he deals from the middle ur bottom. You hyear me—he's put up the scurviest trick on ye a man ever did on anybody—him an' the Don! Hel hel hel!"

"What has he to do with the Don?" asked Prue, scenting treachery.

But Luny put on one of his mysterious looks, as he always did when asked a question which, for some inscrutable reason, he did not care to answer.

His eyes twinkled, as he said:

"Keep yer eye skinned! He's ringin' in a cold deal on ye, sure as ye live!"

And with that knowing look the face began to retreat.

"Stop! Wait!" whispered Mrs. Musgrave breaking through her reserve. "I want to ask you about Kit!"

But the face was withdrawn; and though she felt a wild impulse to rush out of the wickiup and detain the imbecile, she was forced to remain in suspense far greater than before.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH!

A NIGHT of moody meditation did not improve Captain Flood. He had reflected on the manner of Mrs. Musgrave's reception of him in the character of a rescuer, until even the obstinacy of his blind passion began to yield to the conviction that nothing could soften her antipathy to him.

Then the devil of his nature, heretofore in some measure curbed, slipped the leash!

"With or against her will!" he said to himself, breathing hard through set teeth and dilating nostrils.

This determination, all along covertly entertained, but now clearly avowed, henceforth peered from his eyes, so that Mrs. Musgrave quailed beneath their baleful light, when he approached her.

"Will you walk with me?" he asked, when they had breakfasted. "I wish to speak to you."

Feeling how completely she was in his power, the woman complied without opposition.

For a long time he walked in gloomy silence, with his eyes on the ground, while the trembling woman at his side grew more and more fearful of what was to come.

The unbroken way was altogether too

rough for one so unused to hardship; and her knees seemed as if they would give way beneath her; yet she struggled on, dreading to attract his attention to herself in any way.

But presently she slipped, and he threw out his arm to catch her.

With a low cry of terror she struggled to regain her balance and elude him.

Then he stopped and looked her full in the face, while she stood before him like a culprit awaiting the death sentence.

"Madeline," he said, "I need not restate the feelings that I have entertained for you so long. It remains only to say that, after what has happened, I looked for a change in your feelings toward me."

"It is generous to remind me of what I owe you?" she asked, evasively.

"I have room for but one sentiment," he replied. "I have but one aim—possession! I am willing to owe it to anything that will move you."

"That is impossible!" she said, firmly, though with a sinking heart.

"Nothing is impossible to one who wills strongly enough!" he said.

She did not reply to this. She could not. How much—what—did it mean?

Abruptly he said to her:

"You are free!"

She started, and for the first time looked up at him.

"Free!" she repeated, under her breath.

"Free!" he reiterated, looking fixedly at her.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"Not—not that—"

"Just that."

Her eyes widened and darkened with terror.

"Explain yourself," she said. "You have said too much, not to be more explicit."

"It is needless," he insisted. "You know it all already."

She pressed her hand over her heart, and bowed her head again.

Did he mean that—all that the word *free* implied?

Her head swam round; she felt that she was sinking, and groped blindly to grasp something for support.

Once more he essayed to save her from falling.

But she shrieked out:

"Oh, God! do not touch me!"

And sprung away from him with a look of horror that sent a chill to his heart.

"You are his murderer!" she said, standing with clinched hands, and now locking him directly in the eyes.

His eye wavered and his lip blanched. His voice, even, betrayed him.

"You are mistaken there," he said. "He died in the general fight."

"Fight? With whom?" she demanded.

"With the Spaniard. There was no one else."

"In your company!" she cried, with withering scorn. "That is too absurdly false."

Then with a sudden burst of rage he threw off the mask.

"If you must have it, you shall!" he cried, with blazing eyes. "It *was* I that killed him!"

"I knew it!"

"But in fair duel. We met in the street of You Bet. There was every formality that would have been observed in New Orleans."

"Yes," she said, "except that they wouldn't have let you murder him, in his state of mind and body."

"Enough! The old score between him and me is wiped out. And now I have more to say. From the first I have been determined that you should never be possessed by any man other than myself. I was willing to win you, if possible. I have used every means. Everything has failed. That I will not allow this to stand in the way of my purpose, you will believe when I tell you of my last resort."

He then laid bare the whole plot, which the reader has had in detail.

"All has failed," he continued, in conclusion. "And now, consenting or not, before the sun sets the words will have been said which bind you to me forever!"

He sprung forward to seize her by the wrist in token of his ownership, but she eluded him and sprung away, to run to the

wickiup and cast herself into the arms of the ever-faithful Prue.

He would have followed, but there came sounds of fighting which he knew this time were genuine.

Hurrying in the direction of the struggle, he was met by a messenger.

"What is the trouble?"

"We have been attacked. Thar must be a gang of fifty, with that Jim Carsdale at their head, an' him gone clean crazy."

"Jim Carsdale! It must be you that is crazy! Why, he's dead!"

"Dead, is he? Waal he's the worst kickin' dead man I ever see!"

"Jim Carsdale? Impossible!"

"Come an' see fur yourself. An' the boys want you bad."

He was soon where he had the evidence of his own senses that Jim Carsdale was yet alive.

At sight of him Jim set up a great shout of rage.

"Hold on, gentlemen! Thar's no use of a general fight hyar! Thar's the scoundrel I'm after! He's my mutton!"

"Come out hyar, you coward!—you woman-stabber! I want to drive a knife to your heart, as you did to the only woman that was ever fit to stand on the earth beside an honest man!"

Captain Flood was now seized with a fierce thirst for the blood of this man who had risen again as from the grave to confront him.

"Nothing will suit me better!" he cried in return. "Let everybody who isn't concerned in this stand back, and I'll put the same blade into your heart that I did into hers!"

"You'll have the chance, curse you! Stand back, men! I want one more chance at this brigand who strikes in the dark."

As the Greeks and Trojans paused in the midst of battle to allow their champions opportunity for a hand-to-hand struggle, so these men of the West made every other consideration yield to the chance of a duel.

"There is one thing understood," said Captain Flood.

"What's that?" asked Carsdale.

"If I kill you, your men are to draw off and let me and mine alone."

"And if I kill you—what then?"

"You step in and take full possession, only giving my men a chance to go unmolested."

"That's clever! But after your men have gone, what do I take possession of, pray?"

"You'll see, if the time comes."

"But I insist on knowing what I am to expect."

"What are you here for?"

"To avenge the death of the woman you slew last night!"

"Is that all?"

"All save my general hatred of you."

"And you did not look to find anything more?"

"I looked for nothing but hard blows."

"There is a pleasant surprise in store for you, then—that is to say, if you survive to profit by it."

"It is understood that I am not on any account to be further molested if I come off best in this encounter?"

"To be sure. Do you suppose that I will not stand by my word?"

"But when I lay you by the heels, those fellows may not feel bound by your agreement."

"Men!" cried Jim, turning to his crowd.

"This is my affair; and I want you to swear to let the matter rest with my success or failure."

They swore as desired.

"Then," said Captain Flood, with a derisive laugh, "it may please you to know that I have here, under my charge, the lady whom you called your wife. You are welcome to her, if you can get to her over my dead body!"

"Ah! I'll have a word to say to her after I am done with you!"

Captain Flood drew his bowie and stuck it into a neighboring tree; then proceeded to cast off his coat, and rolled up his shirt-sleeves, carefully above his elbows.

Jim Carsdale made a similar preparation, but with more precipitation.

They stepped forward into a little open glade, and began circling around each other at a little distance, watching for an opening.

Both had the look of wild beasts, so ferociously alert were their eyes.

Presently Jim sprang forward, and their knives clashed with a grinding shock that struck fire from the blades.

But why describe what followed?

Enough to say: Jim Carsdale's body was borne away by his men, while Captain Flood staggered away, wiping the blood out of his eyes, as it flows from a ghastly wound in the head.

The fight had been a fair one, according to the code, in which every man is recognized as the avenger of his own wrongs, so no further violence ensued.

Captain Flood kept on into the presence of Mrs. Musgrave, all bloody as he was.

"Now at least I have won you," he said.

"It appears that my bullet did not do its work effectually. My bowie has been more certain! I have not come off scathless. I have purchased you with my blood!"

At sight of him, the lady shrieked and covered her eyes with her hands.

It is impossible to tell what might have passed between them; but at this moment came sounds of furious strife.

"The scoundrels have broken their pledge!" cried Captain Flood. "I'll wipe them off the face of the earth!"

And turning like some mad creature, he rushed from the wickiup, but to be met outside by a horseman tearing forward like some wild animal with a pack of hounds at its heels.

"Californy Kit!" he ejaculated, breathlessly.

Instantly turning, he ran back into the wickiup, brandishing his bowie, and shouting:

"No power on earth shall rob me of my prize! At least I have the strength to kill you!"

Mrs. Musgrave sunk upon her knees in helpless terror. Her bosom was defenseless.

But not—not altogether so. A Prouter was "to the fore;" and when did a Prouter fail in an emergency?

Miss Prue, with the coolness and skill which she had acquired in her experience as matron of a ward in a lunatic asylum, sprang forward, caught the murderer by the wrist, threw her arm about his waist, and executed a scientific trip.

He was too weak from loss of blood to withstand the plucky spinster, and was thrown to the ground, and before he had time to rise, Californy Kit, the Always on Hand, sprang into the wickiup, with half a dozen men at his heels.

But a glance showed Captain Flood that these were his own men.

"Ha! we have you now!" he cried.

"Fall upon him, men! Down him! down him!"

And with savage yells and snarls of assent they did his bidding, assailing Kit from every side.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DON DIABLO "PASSES OUT."

A word will fetch Californy Kit's adventures up to the present moment.

He clung to his horse until he dashed into Canvas City; but by the abrupt stopping of the animal before the inclosure which served as a stable to the Canvas City Hotel, his nold was broken, his overtaxed strength giving out; and he fell to the ground with sufficient force to render him unconscious.

At that hour of the night nobody was stirring; and he lay until nearly dawn before he was discovered.

His foot still held by the stirrup, he had been dragged about somewhat by his horse in seeking grass to nibble, but without receiving serious injury.

On being restored to consciousness, he at once set measures in train to secure the rescue of the ladies who had been under his charge.

But the first thing that he discovered was that there was an undercurrent of opposition. The men who were most active in organizing parties to go in pursuit of the outlaws regarded him with suspicion, or affected to do so, and easily imbued the others with the same feeling.

He was coolly put down; and the men whom he could induce to follow him personally were but a handful.

Mustang, Larabee of Pike and Lem Selberman assumed control of things, assigning each party to the district it was to search; and Kit saw that, to avoid coming to an open rupture with them, when they might put him in bonds and thus cut off all chance of his doing anything until it would probably be too late, he would have to pretend to acquiesce in their arrangements, and then seek to outwit them.

By exercising rare powers of discernment, he selected his men with such care, declining three or four who volunteered to accompany him, as to secure only honest men.

When he had set out on the way assigned to him, and got them out among the mountain passes, he addressed them.

"Gentlemen, you know one another, while I am a stranger to all of you. But I have selected you with a view to getting only friends, who could trust one another. Have I succeeded? Are you acquainted, and friends?"

"Pard," replied one of their number, "you couldn't 'a' spotted a seldier crowd than this, ef you'd knowed us from the cradle. We've all been drunk out o' the same bottle many's the time. Eh, pards?"

"You bet!" was the hearty assent.

"You're the men I want!" said Kit, with a keen sense of satisfaction. "Now I want you to select a leader among yourselves, whom you will be willing to follow without question—one in whose intelligence and honesty you have perfect confidence."

"That thar's Ned Reichart!"

"Ay, ay! Ned's the boy!"

"Now, look a-hyar, fellers!" expostulated Ned, modestly.

"Dry up! No back-talk!"

"I am satisfied with your selection," said Kit. "And now, if I satisfy your captain that my motives are all right, will you follow him?"

"You bet we will!"

Kit took Ned aside, and held a few minutes' earnest conversation with him.

At first he looked surprised; then he frowned; finally his face took a determined set, and his eyes flashed brightly.

"Boys," he said, on his return among the waiting men, "ef you do foller me, you'll never have no cause to regret it; because nothing can't be done amiss ef we don't do it ourselves. Ef you don't foller me—Waal, thar may be somethin' on the carpet what you'd druther you hadn't let go through."

"That's enough!" said one of the men.

"When you see anything as don't look all right, you jest kick!" said Ned.

"Fair enough! Now drive ahead."

Kit immediately changed their course.

Now he must exercise the utmost caution. He was trespassing on the district undertaken by Larabee of Pike. If he was discovered, he might be arrested and thrown in bonds, on a vague charge of treachery. It would not be necessary for the leaders to specify what kind of treachery. They could play upon the prejudices of the men sufficiently to secure their ends.

The result was that he spent the whole day in seeking to keep the general direction of the trail of the outlaws without coming upon Larabee and his men.

That night he spent almost in despair. The task seemed hampered with too many difficulties to be accomplished thus secretly.

Just at dawn some one skulked into his camp.

At first Kit was greatly disturbed, fearing that it was a spy sent by Larabee of Pike; but when he discovered that it was Luny, he was only provoked.

"I shall have to keep him along with me," was his instant decision, "to keep him from betraying me."

But Luny had a story to tell which filled Kit with uncertainty.

Could it be possible that he had really discovered the outlaws? Kit put him through the severest cross-examination he could devise, and at last decided:

"I will trust you, Luny. If you mislead me, you had better never have been born!"

"Do ye see that?" asked Luny, lifting the hair off his temple, and showing the scar which has before been referred to. "I owe him one, boss!"

"But you said that that had been caused by Don Diablo."

"So I did."

"Then how is it that you owe Captain Flood one for it, as you say?"

Luny grinned in his mysterious way.

"You don't know it all, boss," he said. "You do as I say, an' you'll have a surprise party."

Californy Kit was completely mystified. What should he do? The issue was so vital that he could not afford to stake everything on the chance of an imbecile's directing him aright.

"See her!" he cried, seizing hold of Luny, and speaking fiercely. "You've got to speak out. I won't be trifled with in this matter. What do you know? What do you mean?"

But Luny became as sullen as a balky mule. He clinched his hands, set his teeth, and frowned, gathering himself together as if prepared to endure anything rather than open his lips.

Kit at once saw that he was on the wrong tack. There was nothing for it but to placate the imbecile, and trust to him blindly.

"Oh, well," he said, with affected indifference, "I guess it's all right. You go ahead, and we'll say no more about it."

Luny grinned again.

"You tie to me, boss," he said; "an' ye're solid."

He made good his word, by leading Kit directly to the place he sought.

"Look, boys!" cried Kit. "There are the men we're after! Honest men don't wear masks! At them! No quarter to a single soul! Charge!"

And like a veritable fury he dashed forward.

The fight between Captain Flood and Jim Carsdale was over. The captain had just gone to present himself before his captive. The men of You Bet were gathered about their fallen champion, at a loss what to do. Flood's men had grouped themselves in the defile leading into the pocket, as if suspicious of the good faith of the others.

As he approached, Californy Kit did not see the men from You Bet when he caught sight of the masked outlaws. The latter he charged at once.

Luny was on foot, but he rushed forward with the determination of keeping close to Californy Kit; and seeing several horses standing without riders, he mounted the first one he came to, without asking whose it might be, and forced his way to Kit's rear.

Firing his revolvers on either hand, Kit burst through the ranks of the outlaws, and Luny kept after him, though the others were checked.

So Kit penetrated to the lady of his love, just in time to save her from the murderous design of the man whose evil passion had woven such a net of plots about her.

His revolvers were empty, and he realized that, beset by such numbers, a knife would not serve him.

On entering the wickiup, he caught up a bludgeon, clumsy yet effective in the hands of a man who knew its use.

How he laid about him! He would have taken the prize at Donnybrook Fair! In a twinkling he had his foes off their feet to a man.

Fortunately, they, too, had emptied their revolvers earlier in the fight, and in their eagerness to get at him, confident in their numbers, they did not stop to reload.

Meanwhile Luny had caught Mrs. Musgrave, in a fainting condition, up in his arms.

"Out ye go! Whoo-oo-oo!" he shouted, in a sort of insane delight, and bursting through the side of the wickiup, he carried away the prop to the roof, and brought the whole structure down upon the men within.

With his burden he ran to a cluster of rocks which he had espied, and which he believed would serve as a sort of rampart for defense until help reached them.

Miss Pronter was close beside him, and Californy Kit, extricating himself from the debris of the wickiup, followed.

Here Kit relieved the imbecile of his burden, and seeing better protection further up a gulch which set back from this point, he carried Mrs. Musgrave thither.

In spite of his gallantry, Ned Reichart was repulsed. He then discovered the men from You Bet, and sought to induce them to

join in, but they stood by their engagement, and would take no part against Flood's men.

This parley took up some time; and when at last brave Ned resolved to make another charge, he carried the defile without opposition. The outlaws had fled.

He gained the inner pocket, where he was joined by Californy Kit. But, there was no sign of the outlaws. They had gone, carrying their leader with them. The rescuers were in too small force to think of pursuing. They had secured what they wanted, and wisely concluded to be content with that.

On learning that her husband lay at hand in a dying state, Mrs. Musgrave insisted upon going to him, which she was permitted to do. He was too weak to become violent; but the emotion at seeing her served to stimulate him sufficiently so that he fully comprehended what she said.

She explained the whole situation to him, and besought his forgiveness before the grave closed between them.

A reconciliation was thus effected, and he died at peace with her at last.

Fearful of the effects of this prolonged excitement on the delicate woman, Californy Kit hastened with her to the house of a motherly soul whom he knew, whose nursing would be better than the medication of most doctors.

True to his apprehensions, she was taken with brain fever, and for days, after the delirium had passed, lay at the point of death.

But Kit was ever at her side—literally always on hand—cheering her back to life. When she was strong enough to ride, he accompanied her with all the reverential gallantry of a knight of old.

There must have been some wonderful virtue in the mountain air, for it gave her renewed life, but made her more beautiful than ever.

Wonderful to relate, Miss Pronter entered no protest against this "gallivantin' around." She seemed to accept Kit as a conqueror. But as for the rest of mankind, she still showed that she "couldn't abide 'em!"

Her health restored, Mrs. Musgrave returned to the States, taking Luny with her.

It was learned that his imbecility was due to the wound in his head; and she hoped that by the delicate surgical operation known as trephining he might be restored to intelligence—a hope which was fully verified by one of the most renowned surgeons in the United States.

Something like a year later, Californy Kit wended his way Eastward. The last thing that Ian Lonslow, of the Mountaineer's Rest, Slabtown, shouted after him was:

"Send the weddin'-cake prepaid! We's always on hand for *that*, ole pard!"

The subject of bets in that and neighboring camps, for months afterward, was:

"Ef he ever strikes this gee-lorious country ag'in—which the same no livin' man ever took it in onc't, an' didn't hanker arter it all the rest of his nateral life!—will he hev the unadulterated gall to fotch that thar dragon back with him—fur to trot the babies, ye onderstand—hey!"

If the reader can make anything out of these bits of gossip, he is welcome to his conclusions.

Meanwhile, nothing further was seen or heard of Captain Flood or the Spaniard; and it was the theme of many a wordy discussion, as to whether they were really one and the same person, and identical with the famous and infamous Don Diablo.

When the hut of the old seeress was visited for evidence of the masquerade, it was found that the place had been destroyed by fire; and the rock against which it had stood and in which was the alleged secret closet, looked as if it had been blasted. Many contend that the place was struck by lightning.

As for the man, or the two men, who made things so lively "cavortin' around" on that memorable occasion—dead or alive, he or they "kept shady."

THE END.

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